

hi-fi news

& Record Review

164 pages!

135+
REVIEWS
SEPARATES,
VINTAGE
& MUSIC

ULTIMATE HI-FI 2013

The year's finest products
and essential music

Equipment

Over 60
standout
separates tested

Vintage

Audio icons
of yesteryear

Music

The best LPs,
CDs and hi-res
downloads

Opinion

Our columnists'
hi-fi high points

• **TURNTABLES, ARMS & CARTRIDGES** Acoustic Solid to vdH • **USB DACS** ARC to Metrum Acoustics
• **DIGITAL DISC & MEDIA PLAYERS** Accuphase to T+A • **TRANSISTOR & TUBE AMPS** Bryston to TAD
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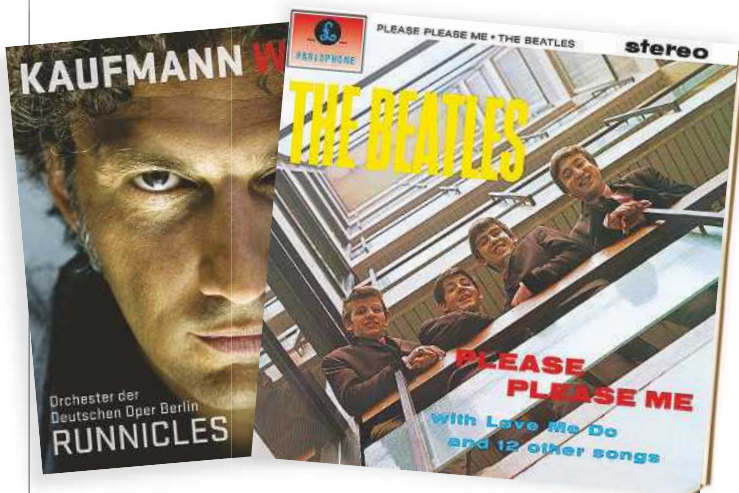


YEARBOOK/13



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RIGHT: Krell's mighty S-550i integrated amplifier puts many a pre/power to shame (p62)



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RIGHT: *Hi-Fi News & RR* is the exclusive UK representative of EISA's Audio and Home Theatre panels. Paul Miller is the EISA Audio & HT Panel Manager

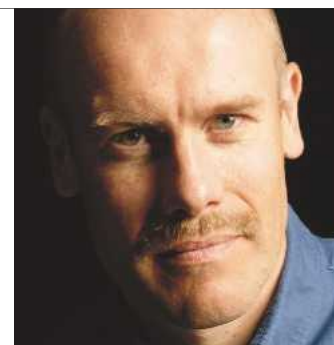


Welcome, audiophiles, enthusiasts and music lovers all to our annual Yearbook. This 164 page feast celebrates the hardware that turned our heads and the music that stirred our souls throughout 2013. It's a wishlist of the best source components, amplifiers and loudspeakers from across the globe with more than a few vintage audio heroes on show to remind us of hi-fi's deep roots.

And those roots continue to throw up fresh shoots of opportunity for audio fans as 2013 has continued to witness the inexorable shift in how we consume, or at least *realise* our music. Never a month seems to go by and another website offering high resolution stereo downloads pops up on our screens.

Our unique hi-res music reviews may indicate that not all 96kHz or 192kHz downloads are as pristine as we'd like, but if this world of virtual media is the new wild west of hi-fi, then there's certainly still audiophile gold in 'them thar hills'!

We also have different ways to play back this content as the new generation of hi-fi media players typically offer both USB 2.0 and wired Ethernet connections to access a world of music stored, perhaps, in an adjacent room. Solutions range



from the fantastically complex, like the dCS Vivaldi (p51) to the deceptively elegant, such as Chord's DSX1000 (p49), both new products also offering compatibility with the growing library of DSD format downloads.

Of course, for many music lovers nothing will ever top the physicality of the LP gatefold, the tactile presence of the vinyl medium, the sense of hushed anticipation as the stylus settles

'You have a chance to hear many Yearbook products in action...'

into the groove. And it's this routine, nothing less than an act of homage for vinyl acolytes, that ensures the turntable and 12in black disc also continue to flourish in this virtual world.

If you want to experience many of our Yearbook products in action, don't forget to book a ticket for our high-end Hi-Fi Show in Windsor, 25-26th October (see www.hifinews.co.uk/show).

PAUL MILLER GROUP EDITOR

HI-FI NEWS' EXPERT LINE UP: THE FINEST MINDS IN AUDIO JOURNALISM BRING THEIR EXPERIENCE TO BEAR ON ALL AREAS OF HI-FI & MUSIC



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Investigative journalist supreme, Barry is the first with news of the latest developments in hi-fi and music technologies



JOHN BAMFORD
JB brings huge industry experience, a penchant for massive speakers and a love of hi-res audio in all its diverse guises



KEN KESSLER
is currently our Senior Contributing Editor and almost singularly responsible for the renaissance in valves and 'vintage hi-fi'



KEITH HOWARD
has written about hi-fi for 30 years, and edited *Hi-Fi Answers* for nine. KH performs our speaker and headphone lab tests



STEVE HARRIS
Former Editor of this very title from 1986 through to 2005. A lifetime in audio and a love of jazz makes Steve a goldmine



JOHN HOWES
Foremost collector and archivist of vintage hi-fi, famous for the UK's bi-annual Audio Jumble, John shares his experience with *HFN*



STEVE SUTHERLAND
Worked on *Melody Maker* and then edited *NME* from 1992-2000, the Britpop years. Steve brings a unique slant to our Vinyl Release pages

Aria 900

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To find out more and for a list of participating retailers visit:
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ABOVE: Glorious high-end gear (p14 onwards)

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Special Christmas offer
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USA, Las Vegas – CES

HI-FI NEWS SHOWBLOG

One of the advantages of being the oldest hi-fi magazine in the world is we've had time to station our reporters in hi-fi nations across the globe, all eager to file stories from the biggest shows. Every month we offer our Showblog from a major international event including the International CES in Las Vegas, and the High End Show in Munich through to the annual shows in Russia, Hong Kong and Sweden in addition to the UK's Bristol Show and John Howes' popular Audio Jumbles. Our Showblogs provide a unique glimpse of the world's newest and tastiest hi-fi, all from the comfort of your armchair!



This AMG Viella 12 was one of very few record players in active use at CES – the TW Acoustic Raven Black Night being another notable exception – and both sounded glorious. The 12in anodised tonearm features a novel dual-pivot bearing while the quartz-controlled belt-drive offers 33.3, 45 and 78rpm speeds. www.amg-turntables.com



Jozefina Lichtenegger, the 'First Lady' of hi-fi, poses for our camera with EAT's new E-Glo valve phono stage and E-Go unipivot tonearm. The phono stage has an outboard PSU with separate anode and heater supplies connected to the preamp itself via a 9-pin umbilical. Lundahl transformers feature at the MC input. www.euroaudioteam.com



Few high-end components are as bespoke as those from Qualia & Company. Product planning and design is spread between the US and France while the manufacturing is still undertaken in Japan. The preamp (pictured) joins a phono amp and USB DAC, all the components being built into Qualia's distinctive casework which is machined from a solid block of alloy. Production is by order, prices on request. www.qualia-highend.com



Canada's Tri-Art Audio takes the concept of 'brick-like' hi-fi to a new level with [left to right] its \$1700 Block passive pre, Block Battery Pack and accompanying \$1800 Class D 50-S amplifier. The internal gubbins of each 'Block' is embedded into a concrete face plate and plinth while the cabinet is fashioned from bamboo. www.triartaudio.com



JBL's finest loudspeaker – the Project Everest DD66000 just received an upgrade, realised here in the DD67000 (\$37k each). This three-way loudspeaker features a pair of 15in three-layer (pulp/foam/pulp) bass drivers and horn-loaded 4in and 1in beryllium mid and treble drivers. Driven via Levinson separates, these new Everests sounded truly superb, filling the huge room with ease. See www.jbl.com

UK – Bristol Show



Designed in Russia and made in Singapore, this is the £20k Passeri CD player by Loit. The chassis is a carbon-fibre/alloy composite supported on three ceramic ball bearings while the top-loading transport uses a Philips CD-PRO2 mech isolated on a silicone gel suspension. The post-DAC I-to-V stage is achieved by an all-tube circuit. This awesome player is distributed by www.alternativeaudio.co.uk

Audiolab was previewing two new compact audio components: the Q-DAC, based on the award-winning M-DAC but with simpler functionality, and the M-PWR stereo power amp 'designed to match the M-DAC both aesthetically and sonically'. Pictured are the huge Quad ESL 2912s partnered by the Platinum CD player/preamp and monoblocks [see p53]. www.quad-hifi.co.uk



Canton of Germany has an impossibly vast range of loudspeaker models. A mere few were on show including the top Chrono SLS 790 three-way floorstander with its magnetically-fastened grille. On the right of our picture is an example of its best-selling GLE series, the 496 three-way boasting a high 90.5dB sensitivity. www.canton.de

Conrad Mas seen with the new Ingenium turntable. The skeletal deck shares its sapphire bearing with the Diva II turntable but the T-shaped 'chassis', machined from a 2.5in section of aluminium, sets the Ingenium apart. The basic £800 deck can be supplied with a 9in Project Carbon tonearm for £1260 or with twin-arm mounts (one supporting a 12in arm) for £1200. www.avidhifi.co.uk



It's always wise to don a set of sunglasses before marching into the Quadral room and this year was no exception. Bedecked in a high gloss red, this fab floorstander is the new Vulkan Aurum, marrying the same mid and tweeter unit we saw in the Titan [HFN Nov '12] with two new 21cm woofers. Prices start at £7500 (+£400 for any gloss colours). www.quadral.com



Demonstrated along with Townshend cables and preamp, Brinkmann mono power amps and Dynaudio's superb C1 standmounts, the '1543 DAC' from Computer Audio Design was developing some fine sounds via hi-res media from an Asus laptop/JRiver combo. Priced at a heady £6900, this NOS DAC has a single USB input only. www.computeraudiodesign.com

Germany – Munich Show



KEF is the latest genuine speaker builder to enter the headphone fray, with the blissfully comfortable M500. It houses a 40mm driver said to cover 20Hz-20kHz, has a 32ohm impedance, weighs 208g, offers iPhone/iPad/iPod compatibility and is priced at €299 (around £250 in the UK). Musical Fidelity's Antony Michaelson was seen at the show with his rather cool heavyweight cans, while PSB was promoting *its* models. www.kef.com



Now shipping is Dan D'Agostino's Momentum preamp, with six line inputs and two main outputs. This example features gorgeous black livery, and we'd hate to have to choose this or the 'silver'. It's hard to put a finger on what DD has done to the unit since CES, but every detail is perfect, the feel of the controls is a tactile delight and the sound is, well, spectacular. www.dagostinoinc.com



Amphion, one of the industry's more sensible brands, went wild with hand-painted speakers, but then they weren't alone, as this is a fetish typical of the Munich show. This row of two-ways was decorated by Finnish firm Studio Halonen using the Ion+ as a base, with the prices of these limited editions at €1000. www.amphion.fi

Absolute's Passion 845 Monoblock is a gorgeous SET that claims 50W, so you're not restricted to high sensitivity speakers. Two 845s, a brace of 6SN7s, hand-wound transformers and XLR input are housed in a 382x295x622mm (whd) shell of leather and wood to form a very pretty amp weighing 40.3kg. www.absolare.com



Our favourite product of the show was Pro-Ject's Elemental turntable, complete with arm and cartridge, pre-set at the factory so the customer can't mess it up, and retailing for €199. Amusingly, that's the figure we gave when Pro-Ject boss Heinz Lichtenegger asked us how much we thought it cost to *manufacture* the Elemental. What a bargain! www.project-audio.com

All-new is the fascinating range from Spec, a Japanese company with a full line-up. Models include the RSA-F3 EX, RSA-M3 EX, RSA-717 EX and RSA-V1 EX Class D MOSFET amplifiers and REQ-S1 EX two-chassis phono equaliser, all with complex wooden subchassis, while the handsome turntable seen upper right is a prototype. www.spec-corp.co.jp



Russia – Moscow Show

Onkyo can't be accused of hiding anything from its customers. Here its flagship TX-NR5010 AV receiver had its top plate removed so that everyone could see that it genuinely has no fewer than nine discrete channels of power amplification. Also of note is that it has an active (digital) crossover built in, enabling it to drive a front pair of speakers, avoiding their passive crossovers. www.onkyo.com



Clearaudio showed its Master Innovation turntable (top of left rack) with flagship 'Statement' technology. Its no-contact system has main and upper platters floating on a magnetic field above the drive platter. The electronics were from Teac's Distinction series which echoes the looks of the more costly Esoteric line. www.clearaudio.de, www.teac.com

Transrotor recently added two new turntables to its catalogue – the Rossini and Crescendo – the latter shown in Russia for the first time. Weighing more than 25kg, it's the most affordable deck from the German company to feature its Transrotor Magnet Drive technology. www.transrotor.de



Teac's new mid-sized 501 series of components includes a stereo integrated amp, headphone amp, a DSD-capable DAC and CD player. Beautiful retro styling, high class metal bodies and outstanding build quality makes for a great combination. They also see the company taking a serious step into real-world hi-fi. www.teac.com



Russian tube amplification and acoustics specialist Next Sound came up with an unusual system. Vintage professional JBL 43 series speakers were driven by proprietary vacuum tube monoblock amplifiers and an active crossover. In terms of sound it was perhaps easily the best rock-oriented system of the show. www.next-sound.ru



Guru speakers from Sweden are new to the Russian market. They come in a variety of colours, sport aluminium top plates and promise to deliver sound as uncoloured as is possible to achieve from a passive home monitor (Guru has a pro-line of active monitors as well). The slot-loaded enclosures also have a distinctive appeal. www.guruaudio.com



Portugal – The Audio Show



Here we were given a glimpse of the REF 10 preamp from Audio Research [see *HFN* Mar 13]. It was combined with the Reference 750 monoblocks with fabulous results. The new flagship preamp incorporates many of the developments found in the company's Anniversary preamp and also features touch-screen control, but is offered at a more affordable price. www.audioresearch.com



Creek has been warmly welcomed back to the Portuguese market. On dem was its Destiny 2 CD player and Evolution 2 integrated amplifier driving a pair of Epos Acoustics Epic 6 loudspeakers. Despite the room's small dimensions the sound of the system was nothing if not addictive, visitors remarking on its toe-tapping performance. www.creekaudio.com



The Alexia from Wilson Audio [see p93] was one of the most admired loudspeakers at the show. They were fed by Audio Research Reference 750 monoblock power amps, now with KT120 output tubes. The digital source used was the Metronome Calypso, while on the analogue front an SME 30/2 turntable was pressed into duty. www.wilsonaudio.com

One of the many highlights of the show was provided by Constellation Audio with its Centaur amplifier and Virgo preamp [see p57], the brainchildren of a group of world famous designers such as John Curl, Bascom King and Peter Madnick, to name but a few. The source was a PS Audio combination formed of a PerfectWave transport and DAC II digital converter/streamer [either side of the Virgo pre] while the loudspeakers were Magico S5s [see p89]. www.constellationaudio.com



Peachtree showed its Grand Integrated amplifier. It features ESS Sabre D/A converters, a USB asynchronous input with 24-bit/192kHz capability and, according to the company, kicks out 440W per channel into 8ohm! www.peachtreeaudio.com



It's hard to do justice to the Rui Borges Unico in a few words. Custom made, this high-mass turntable is just one of an impressive range of decks from Portuguese designer Rui. The sound coming out of it really was as impressive as its looks, though you'll need deep pockets. It costs 50,000 Euros. www.ruiborgesturntables.com



Stockholm – High End Show



Peter Bremen (left) is a prominent figure in the Swedish audio community, having run Stockholm's most prestigious hi-fi shop, Ljudbutiken (Soundstore). For some years now, he's been busy developing his own Bremen speakers. These wall-mounted designs feature two side-firing bass/midrange drivers. Here Peter is explaining the challenges involved in designing the loudspeakers' grilles. www.bremen.se



Sennheiser's heavyweight HDVD 800 headphone amp allowed visitors to hear the sound of the company's flagship HD 800 cans in balanced mode. As well as traditional RCA inputs, the amplifier sports AES/EBU, S/PDIF and USB digital inputs which are resolved at 24-bit/192kHz via a Burr-Brown DAC. www.sennheiser.com



The most eye-catching power amplifiers came from Swedish company Engström & Engström. The Lars Type 2 is based around twin 300B-XLS tubes, and while said to deliver just 36W they certainly had no problems driving these Tannoy Definition DC10As. The smaller, classical sets sounded particularly sweet and musical. www.thelars.se

The Django L from Marten is a smaller version of its popular Django XL floorstander. A two-way design, it features twin 8in aluminium/ceramic bass units from SEAS with a 1.25in ceramic tweeter from Accuton. Sensitivity is a claimed 88dB and impedance 6ohm. They measure 114x25.3x41.5cm (hwd) and are available in Piano Black or Silver Grey finishes. www.marten.se



Here's the Rock 7 from Townshend Audio. Upgradeable in stages, it's seen here with optional damping trough and outrigger/paddle. An open-frame, belt-driven design, the '7 features a two-speed motor mounted on Townshend's 'Seismic Load Cells'. www.townshendaudio.com

Forty kilos of high-tech and wood: the two-and-a-half-way Sunrise speaker from German company Artos with its ceramic drivers custom-made by Acuton. The CD player is from MBL and the neat Class A monoblocks are the A3.5 Mk II from Valvet. All cabling was from Swedish company Bibacord. www.artos-audio.de



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 Supplied by: BD Audio Ltd
 Telephone: 01684 560853
 Web: www.acoustic-solid.de; www.bd-audio.co.uk
 Price: £2075

AUDIO
FILE



Acoustic Solid Wood MPX

Acoustic Solid is now back in the UK, and one of the first decks distributor BD Audio has chosen to bring to our attention is the Wood MPX.

While its higher echelon turntables are largely constructed of metal and circular in appearance with additional arm and motor mounting pods, the Wood series are more conventional and plinth-based; five variants are available. The Wood MPX boasts a 70mm-thick plywood (rather than MDF) plinth. Its high mass, 60mm

the motor does a sterling job of bringing it up to speed. The red/green LED on the controller flashes once the correct speed has been established and locks to one colour: green for 33.3rpm, red for 45rpm.

The platter itself is immaculately finished, perfectly balanced and comes topped with both a suede mat and a 5mm-thick acrylic item (which we preferred not to use).



THE HEART OF IT

Our review Wood MPX was supplied with the 9in Acoustic Solid model WTB211, a tonearm made by Ortofon with removable SME-style headshell. Acoustic Solid also offers headshell upgrades for optimum cartridge matching.

With an Ortofon Cadenza Red fitted, Metallica's *Black Album* [Warner] was first on to the platter, and as the volume control was gradually edged higher we realised that the Wood MPX is a turntable that really likes to get to the heart of the music. 'Nothing Else Matters' starts off fairly softly and as things picked up further into the song, there was no sense of compression

or hesitancy: everything just grew in a rousing and highly impact-filled crescendo – exactly what's needed for this sort of material!

Moving to something a little more sophisticated, the Acoustic Solid imbued Tift Merritt's 'Still Pretending' from her *Tambourine* LP [Lost Highway] with a delightfully well-formed underpinning. The Wood MPX carried the underlying tune beautifully, remaining solid and confident throughout the track. Equally agreeable was its sense of expressiveness and feeling across the midband. Merritt's vocals were vivid and finely etched.

Equally, it expertly reproduced Michael Hedges' acoustic guitar work from *Aerial Boundaries* [Windham Hill], capturing the slightest changes in nuance as the playing veered deliciously from gentle and soft to frenetic and hard. A less capable deck can make these particular guitar sounds strained, but through the Wood MPX they sounded as clear and as lifelike as one could ever have wished for.

The Acoustic Solid is not only a turntable that has plenty of authority but is something of a wizard when it comes to timing. Bass lines stopped, started and flowed effortlessly; each and every note sat in its own space and could be easily picked out, and yet melded with its companions to form a beautifully coherent whole.

VERDICT

The Acoustic Solid Wood MPX certainly adheres to the high-mass ethos but its overall construction is superb. Easy to set up and a joy to listen to, the deck simply lets its precision engineering take you to the core of the vinyl. A really capable turntable. Ⓢ

ABOVE: The Acoustic Solid Wood MPX has a 75mm-thick plywood plinth angled at one corner to accommodate the freestanding synchronous AC motor. The massive platter is belt-driven; a separate speed controller gives fine 33.3/45rpm adjustment

'Through the MPX, bass lines stopped, started and flowed effortlessly'

platter is driven by a freestanding synchronous AC motor via a rubber belt (notwithstanding the company's description of it as a 'string drive' design).

The motor sits in a sturdy and well finished pod, and is powered by a microcontroller; push-button speed switching allows fine-tuning of both 33.3 and 45rpm speeds. Given the weight of the platter,

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.44rpm (+0.31%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.05% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-68.3dB / -69.1dB (inc. weight)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-68.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-64.9dB
Power Consumption	5W
Dimensions (WHD inc lid)	470x250x370mm

AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control and tonearm
 Made by: Clearaudio Electronic GmbH, Germany
 Supplied by: Sound Foundations
 Telephone: 01276 501392
 Web: www.clearaudio.de; www.soundfoundations.co.uk
 Price: £4360-£4610 (depending on finish)



Clearaudio Ovation/Clarify

New to the Clearaudio line-up this year, this tidy-looking Ovation model sits at the top of its group of turntables that all feature a rectangular plinth.

Borrowing from the Innovation range, the Ovation nonetheless brings several new technologies of its own into play. The plinth is made of aluminium layers sandwiching a layer of Panzerholz ply. (This is claimed to offer considerable sonic gains over such alternatives as acrylic and standard wood.)

The wood has to be machined to accept the motor, bearing and armboard, and the space left over

and change between all three speeds (the Ovation offers 78rpm too) is equally prompt.

Machined from a slab of Polyoxymethylene the 26mm-thick platter increases to 38mm at the edges for an improved flywheel effect; it is also dynamically balanced. Finally, this whole construction spins on one of Clearaudio's Ceramic Magnetic Bearings that supports the pivot point on a magnetic field and rotates it around a polished shaft.

The Clarify tonearm has a carbon-fibre arm tube and beautifully machined aluminium headshell, with an unbroken run of Clearaudio Directwire cable from cartridge tags to phono plugs at the far end. But the arm's most notable feature is its magnetic bearing system in which the arm effectively

'levitates', anchored only by a wire tie to the bottom of the housing.



SPOT-ON PRECISION

It was evident from the outset that Clearaudio's various technologies pay dividends in the fine sense of neutrality that the deck offers. And in terms of stereo imagery, the Ovation is very precise in the soundstage it generates, allowing

the musicians plenty of space. Instrumentalists and vocalists could be placed with almost millimetric precision: when Dylan LeBlanc sang 'If Time Was For Wasting', from his *Pauper's Field* LP [Rough Trade], we felt that, if we'd shut our eyes and then reopened them, he'd be right in front of us! Equally, the finely-picked acoustic guitar on this track was delightfully vivid, with the pedal steel guitar tucked in expertly just behind it.

Nor did the pair lose their impressive imaging abilities when the music became more densely layered and rough-edged. 'Starry Blue Eyed Wonder' from The Icicle Works' 1998 album *Blind* [Beggar's Banquet] starts off softly, and then the level rises: the Ovation captured this perfectly, bringing a fine sense of order to the music. Equally, the much simpler 'One True Love', with Ian McNabb's vocals underpinned by Chris Layhe's bass guitar, was a delight to hear – the Ovation and Clarify really catching the essence of every single string strike, while also knitting them together convincingly.

This level of control could seem at times to work against noisier tracks. An attempt to find the Ovation's inner disco diva, for example, courtesy of The League Unlimited Orchestra's *Love And Dancing* [Virgin], fell rather flat. Again, all was crisp and superbly detailed but on an emotional level it felt a bit like watching a ballroom dancer trying to break-dance.

VERDICT

The Ovation's even-handed neutrality will undoubtedly win it many new friends. The 'magnetic bearing' Clarify arm is clearly a good partner for the deck and together they form an impressive package. ☺

ABOVE: Available in gloss black and the laminated wood finish seen here, the Ovation features Clearaudio's Panzerholz chassis material, providing an inert base. Speeds are available at the touch of a button, and governed by an optically-referenced servo

'The Clarify effectively "levitates", anchored only by a wire tie'

is filled with a rubber damping material loaded with innumerable tiny stainless steel balls.

The deck is belt-driven using a DC motor that transfers drive to a metal sub-platter. This has a very fine pitch strobe ring on its underside while an infra-red sensor in the plinth monitors the rotation speed for perfect regulation. Start-up times are commendably swift

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.29rpm (-0.13%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.03% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-69.5dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-72.1dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-57.4dB
Power Consumption	2-9W
Dimensions (WHD)	420x115x350mm

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**AUDIO
FILE**

Idler-drive turntable with mechanical speed control
Made by: Inspire Hi-Fi Ltd, Derbyshire
Supplied by: Inspire Hi-Fi Ltd
Telephone: 01246 472222
Web: www.inspirehifi.co.uk
Price: £2500



Inspire Hi-Fi Enigma

As the world once more starts to embrace idler-drive, the problem faced by a turntable manufacturer today is that tooling-up for a completely new design would be prohibitively expensive because of the relatively low production numbers involved.

Inspire Hi-Fi has stepped up to the challenge of providing an affordable solution and, as with its Technics SL1200-based Monarch flagship [*HFN* Oct '12], has chosen to use a plentiful classic design, the evergreen Goldring Lenco GL75, as the basis for its Enigma. It comes in a range of fine paint finishes – red, blue and black are available.

One of the most popular turntable units through the 1970s, the GL75 had a reputation for its

wheel that runs on the underside of the platter.

The arrangement allows continuously variable speed from 16rpm to 80rpm. Four movable detents allow speeds of 16, 33.3, 45 and 78rpm to be set: a neat arrangement but one prone to slight drifting, we found, especially when the deck was moved.

Inspire strips the donor deck, re-sprays the top-plate, services the motor and bearing thoroughly and re-assembles with a sprinkling of brand new parts. All mechanical items are checked and re-machined as necessary and the platter is polished to a mirror finish. The deck's top-plate is cut out to accept a new arm-mounting plate configurable for any 9in template preferred by the customer.

Finally, an Inspire ACRI mat and Puka record weight are added and the chassis is mounted in a beautifully finished solid wood plinth that can be veneered to the

purchaser's requirements.



DIGGING DEEP

The review sample was supplied with an SME M2-9 and Ortofon Cadenza Red MC. Listening to a deck like the Enigma for the first time can be an illuminating experience for many people, as the overall tonal balance of an idler-drive deck is often quite

different from that of a belt-drive. A perfect example was found on the eponymous title track from Beth Hart's album *Bang Bang Boom Boom* [Provogue]. Each section of the rhythm behind this track ends in two low piano notes, and whereas we were used to the first, slightly higher frequency one, being emphasised, the Enigma clearly picked out the second, lower note each time it was played.

It is for a good reason that idlers are so favoured by the bass-loving fraternity, as they really do dig deeper and the Enigma showcased this to great effect. It also set up a fine sense of front-to-back spaciousness, and gave performers plenty of space to work in as they played. The underlying pace of the music was very well captured too.

Higher up the frequency range, we found that the Enigma has a pleasingly neutral character. Working our way steadily through various genres, it seemed that the Enigma pulls off the old idler trick of making records seem just that little bit louder.

This trait would put the Enigma right at the top of a potential shopping list if low-end action is your main thing, but we continued to be impressed by the way in which the Inspire deck will turn its hand to anything. It sounded a treat when it came to thunderous orchestral material; equally, though, its fine detail retrieval meant that softer acoustic material sounded lifelike and natural.

VERDICT

Inspire Hi-Fi's Enigma modifications strike an admirable balance between subtle updating and maintaining the performance and quirkiness of the Lenco original. ☺

ABOVE: Inspire Hi-Fi thoroughly reconditions the idler drive wheel, motor, bearing and clutch mechanics from a Goldring Lenco GL75 donor chassis for its Enigma turntable. The top-plate comes in various metallic colours – the plinth is solid wood – and there are detents for four replay speeds: 16, 33.3, 45 and 78rpm. Different 9in arm mount plates are available

'Its fine detail retrieval meant that softer material always sounded lifelike'

fine build quality, so Inspire Hi-Fi has felt the need to do comparatively little to the deck's basic mechanical componentry in order to exploit its replay potential.

The basis of the deck is a 240V synchronous AC motor which lies on its side under the deck plate. The rotor is a single-piece cone-shaped item over 2in long. Drive is taken directly from this to a vertical idler

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.45rpm (+0.35%)
Time to audible stabilisation	2.5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.03% / 0.06%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-68.7dB (-69.0dB with weight)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-67.2dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-57.1dB
Power Consumption	8W
Dimensions (WHD)	475x120x415mm



Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control
 Made by: Stella Inc., Tokyo, Japan
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.techdas.jp; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £75,000

AUDIO
FILE



TechDAS Air Force One

It does not take a genius to see, even without hearing what one could do, that the Air Force One, with its air suspension, air bearing and vacuum LP hold-down, is something out of the ordinary.

This turntable is the fruit of almost a half-century's experience in high-end audio. Chief designer Hideaki Nishikawa-san says 'The goal of Air Force One is to achieve silence in reproduction comparable to digital reproduction, especially in reproducing the recorded information of the background

'From the most ghostly of background silences the sound came like magic'

noise.' This is the first time we've ever heard a turntable designer acknowledge that the background and between-track silences of digital are virtues one should aspire to in analogue, even if attaining them seemed impossible.

Its construction is deliriously complex, with its stainless steel main platter enhanced by interchangeable upper platters,

rotating above a sandwich construction base. The latter rides above a floating glass sub-level, the entire 43kg assembly resting on massive, adjustable, air- and polymer-gel-cushioned feet.

In addition to the two external boxes for power and air, and the deck itself, is a separate housing for the AC synchronous motor. It drives a platter that weighs up to 30kg (depending on the choice of upper platter) through a flat surface-polished polyurethane fibre belt, the 33.3/45rpm speeds controlled by a 2x50W amplifier.

A front display shows the speed to two decimal places, with pitch control in ± 0.1 rpm steps. The display communicates with the user, saying,

for example 'Wait' as it gets up to speed. Where it astonishes, though, is in the rapidity with which it clamps down an LP if you're using vacuum hold-down.

Each AFO comes with a tonearm board with space at the rear for a second. It is also supplied with one of three upper platters but customers can, of course, buy all of them. A massive dust cover is also

provided, while another extra is a special damping table.

A PEERLESS PLATFORM

We heard the Air Force One in four systems, all of which benefited from its strengths, while more than once the notion of a CD's quietude crossed our minds.

Sam and Dave's *Soul Men* [Stax] was the first to illustrate Nishikawa's desire to strip away any of the unwanted noises we seem rarely to escape when playing vinyl. Raw soul, with sizzling guitar work, meaty bass, two voices duelling – the ultimate arbiter of the AFO's excellence was the interplay between Sam's clear tenor and Dave's raspy baritone.

Never have we heard 'Broke Down Piece Of Man' reproduced with so much energy nor with the sense of anguish and pain demanded of the performance. Dave delivering the line 'Heartache and misery, walk by my side,' then pleading, 'Please give our love another chance' – the torment would elicit forgiveness from the coldest of cynics.

LPs flew from shelf to platter. Willy DeVille's *Miracle* [Polydor] is the showcase that gave us 'Assassin Of Love'. DeVille possessed a voice of such distinct texture and deep resonance that woofers probably quaked at mention of his name. From the most ghostly of background silences came a sound that materialised as if by magic.

VERDICT

Irrespective of arm or cartridge used, the Air Force One is a peerless platform for vinyl. It is the most revealing analogue source we have ever heard bar the best examples of open-reel tape. ☺

ABOVE: Able to support two arms, this turntable features pitch control and buttons for suction and play speeds. A huge AC synchronous motor is separate from the main chassis, driven via a 2x50W amplifier and adjustable in ± 0.1 rpm steps. Platter options are duralumin, stainless steel or methacrylate

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.34rpm (+0.02%)
Time to audible stabilisation	20sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.01% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-74.0dB (-70.0dB w/o vacuum)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-74.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-55.1dB
Power Consumption	50W
Dimensions (WHD)	600x160(+arm)x450mm

AUDIO
FILE

Magnetically-stabilised, fluid-damped unipivot tonearm
 Made by: Graham Engineering Inc, USA for EAT, Prague
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.euroaudioteam.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £6300



Euro Audio Team E-Go

Some of the world's most expensive, highly-developed tonearms are 'unipivots', though in some cases they have additional bearings: Mørch has a dual pivot to give lateral stability, Kuzma a cunning four-point system; Continuum's Cobra arm uses a secondary outrigger pivot mounted on its own bearing.

However, it was left to Bob Graham of Graham Engineering to come up with what is arguably the most elegant way of maximising the benefits of the unipivot concept and smoothing away its disadvantages. The breakthrough came with his 'Magne glide' magnetic stabiliser system – the major innovation of the first, B-44, Phantom arm.

'Despite a surfeit of terse transients "Brass Buttons" managed to sound silky'

Graham lists six separate benefits for it: increased lateral stability, easy azimuth adjustment, a higher lateral inertia component for improved bass reproduction, augmentation of system damping, true vertical pivoting of the stylus with no rotation as the arm is raised, and easily adjusted anti-skate compensation.

The really clever part of this system is its azimuth tower, mounted on a swivelling collar which allows it to rotate about the arm pillar. A cylindrical projection on the right side of the arm bearing housing contains a neodymium magnet centred at the same height as the arm pivot. This attracts a second similar magnet attached to the azimuth adjustment tower,

which in turn is connected to the fixed arm base. The azimuth tower follows the lateral movement of the arm as it

tracks across the record, keeping the arm exactly in position and preventing it from wobbling.

With the current Phantom II Supreme the stabiliser has been improved, there is new internal wiring and a new titanium arm wand, available in three lengths. EAT's version of the Phantom II Supreme, the E-Go, comes only as a 12in, resplendent in matt chrome.

In essence, the Graham bearing is a simple damped point and cup arrangement, both precision-made in Switzerland from tungsten carbide. On first installation, you fill the cup with an appropriate quantity of damping oil, then replace the top cap.

Azimuth adjustment is carried out by raising or lowering the magnet via a screwthread on its swivelling tower, this causing the arm to tilt as required. While you must not adjust azimuth during play, you can adjust the arm height and hence VTA.

RESOLVING A PARADOX

As the E-Go has a short back, it fitted our SME 30/12 without hitting the rear right pillar. The E-Go is one of the most user-friendly unipivots to set up; its removable wand makes it easy to change cartridges too – we settled on Air Tight's PC1.

We put on Gram Parsons' *Grievous Angel* [Reprise] and what made us sit up and take notice was the drum-roll at the end of the track 'I Can't Dance'. It wasn't mere impact: for that we'd turn to Kodo. It was about space and a lack of artifice. The sound of what is just a standard LP possessed the

ABOVE: The titanium arm wand is attached by a screw connector to the massive bearing housing, whose knurled top cap can be unscrewed to access the bearing cup and add viscous damping fluid. Seen right is the VTA adjuster with its Vernier scale for fine tuning

air and three-dimensionality of the crafted-to-a-millimetre sound of the notorious *Sheffield Drum Record*. We rubbed our eyes in disbelief.

It was followed by the delicate piano opening of 'Brass Buttons', compounded by pedal steel and crisp, but discreet percussion ... there was nothing 'brassy' about it at all. It managed, despite a surfeit of terse transients, to sound silky.

The duet on 'Love Hurts' with Parsons' muse, Emmylou Harris, is so achingly gorgeous that you begin to appreciate a system's abilities with vocal textures and spacing. The two stand extreme left and right, the instruments filling in the space – reflecting the song's title by using separation to convey the angst of love. The E-Go perfectly resolved what is one of the most challenging of paradoxes: reproducing bags of information while creating what appears as a sparse soundscape.

VERDICT

EAT's version of the Graham tonearm is as genuinely a 'high-end' purchase as one could make, bristling with clever details and sounding gorgeous. Best of all, it's a unipivot free of masochism. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Bearing / bias type	Uni-pivot / thread and weight
Effective mass (vertical/lateral) / length	13g/13g / 305mm
Offset angle / overhang	17.5 degrees / 12.7mm
Friction (vertical/lateral)	<10mg / <10mg
Downforce accuracy (at 2g)	uncalibrated
Cartridge weight/compliance range	5-20g / 8-20cu
Mounting Type / total weight	SME / 1100g

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AUDIO
FILE

Medium-output moving-coil pick-up
Made by: Linn Products Ltd, Glasgow
Supplied by: Linn Products Ltd
Telephone: 0141 307 7777
Web: www.linn.co.uk
Price: £2960



Linn Kandid

The Kandid is a device purposed to work hand-in-glove with the Sondek LP12 turntable and Ekos SE tonearm combination. It replaces the Akiva, which has flown the marque's flag for MCs for a good few years now.

The Kandid differs in several significant ways, the most visually conspicuous of which is its new 'naked' generator assembly. It has long been known that cartridge bodies induce coloration. So designers have periodically experimented with all sorts of housing materials, but the Kandid dispenses with a conventional body altogether. Potentially, this makes installation hazardous but the Kandid's clever stylus guard is more like a 'body guard', which makes fitting it a relatively easy process.

The chassis is aircraft-grade aluminium, and sports the three-point mounting hole system first seen in the Troika a quarter of a century ago (you can use just the main two holes if not fitting it to a Linn or Naim arm).

Out of the generator assembly protrudes a boron cantilever tipped with a 3x70µm nude line contact stylus; the angle at which this sits has been changed from the Akiva's 23° to 20°, so as to bring the front and rear magnets inside the generator into perfect alignment when the correct tracking weight is

applied. A plastic front yoke screw is fitted (metal might interfere magnetically with the pick-up coils) and this allows the arm counterweight to be set closer to the bearings. Recommended tracking force is 1.72-1.77g (we found the cartridge worked at its best at 1.75g).

'The Kandid "sparkles up" duller recordings, breathing life into them'

While the Kandid is a far less attractive looking affair than the

svelte, black-bodied Akiva, it shows every sign of being as meticulously hand-built.

TUNEFUL
Linn pick-ups have historically been on the incisive side. Suffice to say that the new transducer isn't a radical departure, inasmuch as it doesn't attempt to seduce the listener with a silky suaveness – rather, it gets right into the groove and pulls out the music with breathtaking insight.

Whatever you choose to play, the Kandid shows the same basic instinct to push the song along, as if on a mission to drive the musical point home. Yet this doesn't come from any jarring tonal brightness, rather, it 'sparkles up' duller recordings, breathing life into them without making brighter ones in any way unpalatable.

This said, one could never claim that it delights in dog-eared discs. Our 'well campaigned' original issue of Deodato's *Midnight Cruiser* [Warner] sounds as if it has been to one too many parties, and the Linn doesn't mask this. Yet no sooner had the lead-in groove run its natural course the cacophony of surface noise melted away as the Kandid began to sing like a bird.

Our copy of Tom Tom Club's eponymous LP [Island] has stood the test of time better, and the beautiful but bonkers 'Genius Of Love' sounded just that. The tightly syncopated drum and bass guitar work of Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth was gripping stuff. Even though the track plods along at only a moderate pace, the Kandid was a veritable energy rush – digging deep and throwing out masses of detail. Yet it all fitted together in a natural, believable way.



ABOVE: Linn's MC generator is bolted into a single-piece alloy body with a three-point mounting-plate designed to match the Ekos tonearm. The Kandid has a 3x70µm nude line contact stylus and solid boron rod cantilever. Colour-coded connections exit on flying leads

You'd never call this cartridge sumptuous: it isn't tonally rich in a euphonic way, although placement in the still ever-so-slightly-warm Sondek does invest it with a little more body in the upper bass and lower midband. But wherever it finds itself, the bass sounds taut and tuneful, without any hint of overhang; midband is transparent and three-dimensional, and the treble crisp, delicate and detailed almost to a fault. And what it is brilliant at is locating instruments in space: as Chick Corea's *Return To Forever* [ECM] showed, they might as well be nailed to the back of your listening room wall.

VERDICT

The new Kandid betters Linn's Akiva across the board, bringing greater insight and grip while improving still further on its musicality. Recordings appear in pin-sharp focus, yet the cartridge seems to 'enjoy itself immensely' while doing so. An excellent new moving-coil. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 5.7g
Recommended tracking force	1.7-1.8mN (1.75 mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	600µV / 0.46dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	22cu / 18cu
Vertical tracking angle	24 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	80µm / 75µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.89-9.6% / 0.57-8.8%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.6 to +1.6dB / -0.2 to +3.7dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	34dB / 21dB



Medium-output moving coil pick-up cartridge
 Made by: Lyra Co. Ltd, Tokyo, Japan
 Supplied by: Symmetry, Herts
 Telephone: 01727 865488
 Web: www.lyraaudio.com; www.symmetry-systems.co.uk
 Price: £900

AUDIO
FILE

Lyra Delos

Lyra designer Jonathan Carr has devoted a large part of his life to developing a range of moving-coil pick-ups, and they're expertly built by Akiko Ishiyama and Yoshinori Mishima in Tokyo.

The Delos is the latest in a long line – the baby of the range it's designed to be tonearm and phono-stage friendly: of medium weight and compliance it pushes out a claimed output of 0.6mV at 5cm/sec. Recommended phono stage loading is from 98ohm to 806ohm (Lyra says the final value should be determined by listening). Step-up transformer users should expect a 5 to 15ohm load and the transformer's output should be connected to a 10kohm to 47kohm MM-level RIAA input, says Lyra.

The cartridge body is skeletal and machined from a solid 6063 aluminium billet, which is partially non-parallel in its shape to help minimise resonances. High purity (6N) copper signal coils are fitted, with square-shaped high-purity iron formers. A solid boron cantilever is mounted directly into the cartridge body via a novel asymmetric single-point suspension system, and a Namiki microridge line-contact nude diamond stylus is used.

Thanks to the clever stylus guard design the cartridge proved relatively easy to install into our SME Series V tonearm atop a Michell

high frequencies – but it's so civilised that it never once seems so much as forward, let alone harsh.

Scritti Politti's 'Small Talk' [Virgin 25VC-1028] showed the Lyra's amazing blend of couthness and lyricism; the song's complex, high tempo sequenced percussion is something of a white-knuckle ride for any cartridge, but the Delos proved utterly unflustered. It was able to throw out vast amounts of detail and thread it altogether in a fluent and musically communicative way, never once getting fazed by the crashing Yamaha DX7 keyboard stabs or singer Green Gartside's falsetto vocals.

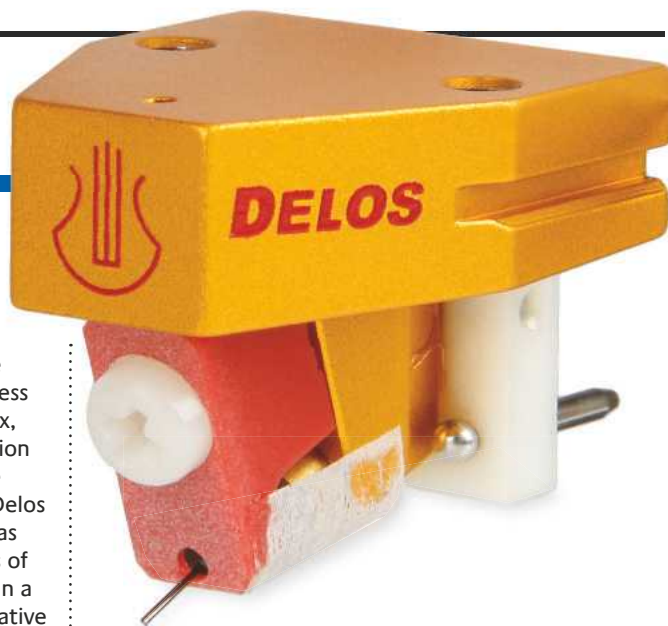
Moving to some classic 1970s rock, Al Stewart's 'Year Of The Cat' [RCA RVP6166] served up that smooth Abbey Road studio sound with voice hovering ethereally over the recorded acoustic. Still, this cartridge didn't get all 'nostalgic', giving instead an extremely spry rendition. The Delos has massive speed, so the strummed steel-string guitars came over with great impact, and it was able to signpost their percussive significance to the song brilliantly. Such delicacy and insight extended to the treble too – the hi-hats and ride cymbal work was totally devoid of splash or sibilance yet possessed a wonderfully authentic steely ring.

Dynamically it impressed too:

Alphonse Mouzon's pile-driving 'By All Means' is a late-'70s jazz-funk standard [MPS] with Herbie Hancock bashing the ivories over Mouzon's virtuoso drumming. The

Delos caught the spaces between the notes deftly, making the beat all the more impactful. Better still, it was able to carry the phrasing of the musicians artfully, showing this classic song to be the roof-raiser that it really is.

Despite serving up a rock-solid bass-drum and snare sound, allied to a super-taut bass guitar and sparkling hi-hats, it still had enough



ABOVE: Lyra's partially exposed MC generator is mounted onto a machined, one-piece alloy body/mounting-plate. The solid boron rod cantilever is fitted with a 2.5x75µm Namiki line contact stylus. Output pins are colour-coded and well spaced while the body has pre-tapped mounting holes

left to render the choppy rhythm guitar and raspy brass brilliantly.

A 1962 Karajan recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony with the BPO [DG] showed the beauty of classical music from vinyl, with a wonderfully atmospheric and immersive recorded acoustic, seemingly falling back forever. This pick-up doesn't inject artificial body and bulk into solo instruments as some more euphonic designs can, but instead chooses to lock on to them and project them in correct proportions with tremendous solidity and composure.

VERDICT

The Lyra Delos has abilities that transcend its price point. Technically brilliant and musically accomplished, it does everything you could reasonably expect of it, and more. Indeed it is so good that it may make prospective purchasers of pricier Lyras wonder why they're spending the extra. ☺

'This cartridge didn't get all nostalgic, giving instead a spry rendition'

Gyrodec, and it tracked rock-solidly at the recommended 1.75g.

LIKE A BALLERINA

The Delos shows itself to be a balletic performer, possessed of a far more graceful, supple and lithe sound that you have a right to expect for under £1000. Essentially it's a very neutral device, with just a touch of extra energy towards the

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 7.3g
Recommended tracking force	1.7-1.8mN (1.75 mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	630µV / 0.37dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	23cu / 18cu
Vertical tracking angle	22 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	>80µm / 75µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.49-3.5% / 0.45-4.4%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.5 to +2.4dB / -0.5 to +2.2dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	34dB / 22dB

AUDIO
FILE

Medium-output moving-coil pick-up
 Made by: A.J. van den Hul b.v, Holland
 Supplied by: Flamingo Audio Ltd
 Telephone: 078 33 95 50 14
 Web: www.vandenhul.com; www.flamingoaudio.co.uk
 Price: £3850



Van den Hul The Crimson

AJ van den Hul's latest hand-built pick-up is called The Crimson and comes in a choice of natural light and dark wood finishes as well as a coloured (also wooden bodied) version. There's a polycarbonate option too.

Although nudity is currently the trend for modern MCs, with generators exposed for all the world to see, The Crimson doesn't quite go all the way and chooses to cover at least a little of its modesty. Still, most internals are visible – and breakable, if you're ham-fisted.

The stick-on 'v.d.Hul' label isn't quite what you'd hope for, cosmetically, on a cartridge of this price, and another disappointment is the stock vdH wooden box, which looks like something that would house a small set of tin soldiers back in the 1950s. Some might think this 'quaint', others will not.

The Crimson gives a claimed 0.65mV output which should be enough for all but the most anaemic of MC phono stages, and it uses gold coils, a samarium-cobalt magnet and a 'VDH 1S' stylus fitted to a boron cantilever. It comes with a free 200hr service check-up (for the original owner), should you want one, and the lead time

'It assaults you with the most exuberant of listening experiences'

is three weeks to build. We found it fiddly to install, quickly learning not to torque it into the headshell too tightly, thanks to a propensity of the threaded metal cartridge body inserts to detach themselves. (Getting them back in again is a faff that will likely prove a low point in your ownership experience.)

Another hurdle is the contemplation of the price of this

product and the damage that a wobble of the hand could cause.

RED ALL OVER

With it nicely aligned in the headshell, riding the grooves at around 1.5g and fully run in, the trials and tribulations of getting The Crimson fitted soon melted away. Suddenly you're transported to a world which turns out to be one of the most exquisite experiences this side of live music itself.

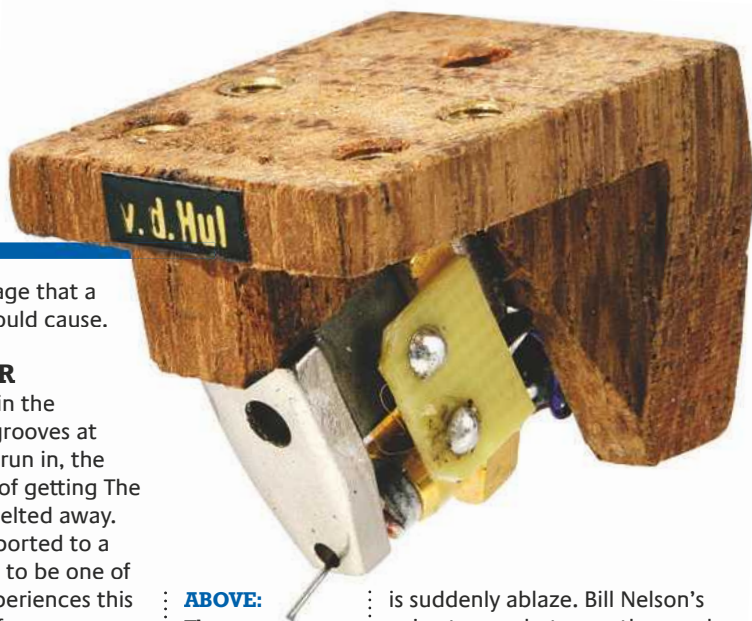
The Crimson pulls off the apparently impossible trick of being saccharine-sweet, yet as sharp and fast as razor blades flying through the air. This vdH MC offers dizzying speed, lightning attack transients and effortless dynamics, while it's also tonally a real smoothie.

Yet it artfully avoids turning into one of those 'forensic' sounding pick-ups: The Crimson doesn't lay out the recording on a grid for you, with everything in its right place for your calm, considered perusal. Rather, it assaults you with the most exuberant and emotionally arresting of listening experiences.

Put on the most modest of recordings, in hi-fi terms, such as Burt Bacharach's 'Reach Out For Me' [A&M], and The Crimson goes wild. The soundstage is vast – almost *too* big – and elements in the mix such as percussion fire out at you with dizzying speed. The lead clarinet assumes a creaminess that's simply not there with lesser pick-

ups; pianos sparkle with harmonics, cymbals glisten, congas beat with a menacing pulse – and the music sounds magical.

Change the record and The Crimson does the same trick all over again. Classic rock in the shape of Be Bop Deluxe's *Modern Music* [Harvest], which is a roller-coaster of power and passion even with the worst of cartridges,



ABOVE: The Crimson features a wooden body with four threaded inserts. 'Gold coils' are mounted in the field of a samarium-cobalt magnet. The fine, line contact stylus is specified as having a 3x85µm VdH 1S profile

is suddenly ablaze. Bill Nelson's voice towers between the speakers while Simon Fox's firecracker drum work awes you with its punch and speed. Everything syncopates so beautifully, and the cartridge has you entranced. It feels as if you can hear all four studio walls.

But it's classical music where it shines most, showing a blissfully natural flow to Stravinsky conducting his *Rite Of Spring* [Columbia]. Instrumental timbre is sublime: strings drip with harmonics yet never screech; brass rasps but doesn't grate; cellos bow darkly and menacingly. The Crimson seems able to peel layers of 'wrapping', and get right to the music, yet it all sounds so easy and organic.

VERDICT

Van den Hul's The Crimson offers a uniquely beguiling combination of speed and sweetness. It is a dazzling performer no matter what music you play, and simply makes you want more. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 8.7g
Recommended tracking force	1.4-1.6mN (1.6mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	825µV / 1.1dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	14cu / 21cu
Vertical tracking angle	28 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	75µm / 80µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.80-9.5% / 0.49-6.8%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-1.1 to +4.1dB / -0.6 to +5.2dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	35dB / 18dB

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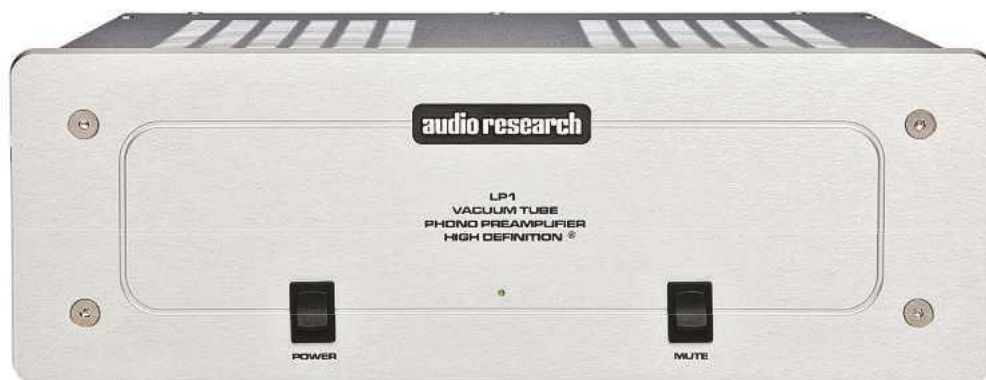
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AUDIO
FILE

Valve MM phono stage
 Made by: Audio Research Corp, Minnesota, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.audioresearch.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £1990



Audio Research LP1

Despite using a tube that has been around since Methuselah was in short trousers, there's nothing old hat about Audio Research's new LP1 phono stage.

It is a hybrid designed to mix the low noise of solid-state with the musicality that comes from glowing bottles. JFETs were chosen for their combination of low noise and excellent sonic performance, the company says. They provide a decent (claimed) 47dB of gain, enough for all MM and some higher output MC phono cartridges – and then comes the 6H30 tube buffer. Audio Research fits the popular Sovtek version, said to give an operating life of some 4000 hours.

And despite being largish for a phono stage, its box is not full of air. Inside you'll see a large custom PCB, populated by well spaced-out

The unit feels classy, as you'd expect from ARC and it offers a sort of timeless, functional appeal.

For a product like this, the front mounted power and mute switches are all that's needed, and only serve to emphasise its no-nonsense feel. There's a 'soft start' built-in to prolong tube life, while sonically it's at its best when it has been on for well over an hour.

ACCOMMODATING

The manufacturer says any pick-up with an output voltage of between 0.7mV and 7mV will work. We tried a range, running everything from an Ortofon 2M Red (output 5.5mV) to Lyra's lowish 0.6mV Delos MC [see p22]. With the latter, the volume needed to go up a little bit more than was ideal, but the LP1 still worked convincingly with it, and was quiet and hum-free.

This phono stage is immediately identifiable as an Audio Research product: it's rhythmically fast paced, dynamically punchy and never backward in coming

forward, yet it doesn't sound harsh on forward programme material.

With some classic '70s rock in the shape of America's 'Ventura Highway' [Warner] the LP1 went straight to the heart of the music, serving up a big, expansive stadium sort of sound. You really felt the melodic importance of the opening acoustic guitar motifs, and how they develop and push the song

along. The strummed acoustic guitars were fast without showing any undue edge. Over this, the vocals hung ethereally, marking out one of the key traits of this phono stage: its excellent image projection and depth perspective.

Tonally, it's a neutral affair, nowhere near as warm and 'valvey' as, say, Icon Audio's all-tube PS3. The Audio Research is far crisper and brighter, shining a searching white beam on the recording, yet without blinding you.

To get the gauge of the LP1's tonal accuracy we spun up Randy Crawford's sumptuous *Secret Combination* [Warner] and 'You Might Need Somebody'. This phono stage showed its mettle by giving a wonderfully clean and open rendering of the recorded acoustic and everything within. It centred the lead vocal with great assurance, and hung the keyboards behind beautifully. Just the opening 16 bars were a treasure-trove of detail.

This 'see-through' midband, allied to its punchy bass and spacious, sparkling treble sets the Audio Research up to sing with pretty much any kind of music. Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* [DG] revealed the Berlin Philharmonic under Karajan in all its fiery majesty, the violins racing along with breathtaking speed, the brass crunching through, in front of bowed cellos, lending a menacing growl to the recorded acoustic.

VERDICT

The affordable LP1 renders music in a highly believable, natural way – it is strong enough to impart the raw power of whatever music it plays, yet smooth enough to gently round off a recording's worst excesses. ⬇

ABOVE: The LP1 looks like a large ARC phono stage that's shrunk in the wash, and lost its rack handles. It's pleasingly minimalist, with just power and mute switches to play with. To keep costs down, there are no balanced connections

'It showed its mettle rendering a wonderfully clean and open acoustic'

components, and the power supply section – complete with US-made frame transformer with multiple stages of regulation – occupying most of it. The four JFETs sit behind the tube buffer. Overall component quality is high – eg, those large Nichicon smoothing capacitors.

The design itself uses no overall feedback, and is non-inverting, with single-ended inputs and outputs.

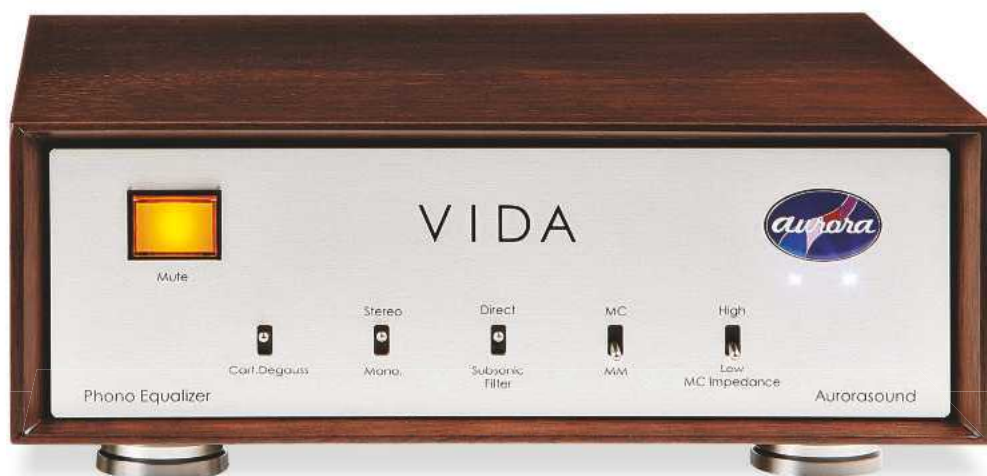
HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading	47kohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	4.63mV
Input overload (re. 1% THD @ 1kHz)	75mV
Maximum output/impedance (re. 1% THD)	15.9V / 115-4.3kohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	85.0dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.35dB to +0.80dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0039-0.16%
Power consumption	22W
Dimensions (WHD)	330x114x218mm



MM/MC phono preamp with degauss facility
 Made by: Aurorasound Inc, Japan
 Supplied by: Pure Sound, UK
 Telephone: 01822 612449
 Web: <http://aurorasound.jp/english>; www.puresound.info
 Price: £2700

AUDIO
FILE



Aurorasound VIDA

After 28 years at Texas Instruments Shinobu Karaki is now designing phono stages. His new Vinyl Disk Amplifier (VIDA) joins a thriving market for analogue-related products in his homeland.

Its late '60s styling isn't out of place next to, say, a similarly 'period' looking Leben tube amp. Yet peer inside its case and you'll see circuitry that's as modern as the latest Mitsubishi motor car. And you'll spy small, specially made Lundahl chokes on the circuitboard. These permit the use of an innovative LCR RIAA equalisation network. Hence 'the world's first LCR phono stage using discrete semiconductors'.

The fascia sports switchable MC and MM input sensitivities,

'A glass-clear midband is the root of all that's good in this phono stage'

a high/low impedance selector and a rather large orange backlit mute switch. Other facilities include a stereo/mono selector and a subsonic filter.

Aurorasound says that each switch uses a sealed small-size signal relay for high reliability and stability, and rhodium-plated RCA terminals are employed for low signal loss. Signal paths are short.

There's also a useful cartridge degauss function.

The VIDA package actually consists of two boxes – the main unit in a wood sleeved case, and a separate power supply which is housed in an aluminium box. Inside is a toroidal transformer and Schottky barrier diode.



A NEUTRAL STANCE

The Aurorasound was tested using Lyra Delos and van den Hul Frog MCs, with a Goldring 2500 used to assess MM performance. The Aurorasound sounds neither forensic nor artificially sweet; what it gives is a very neutral, nuanced view of the music.

Each disc's flavour floods out, the sound remarkably devoid of noise or grain. With a modern techno recording, 'Hazme Sonar' by Morenas, from *Ambient House*, *The Collection* [DFC], the track's electronics swelled around the

soundstage with voluptuous depth and width.

Although the midband is squeaky-clean, you would never call it sterile. Instead, the VIDA sounds natural and even, and this feeds down to a tight, taut bass whose power is perfectly judged.

In the treble it comes across as bright, open and spacious, yet totally devoid of grain and splash.

ABOVE: A handy mute button dominates the fascia, next to cartridge degauss, stereo/mono, subsonic filter, MC/MM and MC load switches. While the main unit gets a retro look, the PSU in its rectangular metal case (not shown here) could come from any 2013 product line-up

The cymbal work on the Chick Corea track 'Return To Forever' [ECM] was a revelation: you could really hear the drummer's subtle phrasing, yet tonally it had a lovely, sophisticated feel. The Fender Rhodes electric piano on this Chick Corea track dripped with rich harmonics just as it should, while saxophones on The Crusaders' 'My Lady' from *Street Life* [MCA MCF3008], were as raw and reedy as you'll ever hear them at home. The VIDA's sound is 'all of a piece' – with no sense of the music's rhythm being lost in translation.

'Girlfriend In A Coma', from The Smiths' *Strangeways Here We Come* [Rough Trade], showed that its lovely glass-clear midband is the root of all that's good in this phono stage. Here it offered startling insight into a recording which *can* sound opaque, fuzzy and two-dimensional.

With the Goldring 2500 MM results remained consistent – that same stadium-sized soundstage again impressed. Cueing up a 45rpm twelve-incher of Gary's Gang's 'Keep On Dancing' [SAM Records] saw the VIDA inciting us to do precisely that... The command it showed of the track's synthesised basslines was remarkable, following every undulation down to seemingly subterranean levels.

VERDICT

This quintessentially Japanese slice of analogue exotica is artfully engineered to give an incisive and detailed sound, yet one that's genuinely musical too, providing a wide open window onto the vinyl groove. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM / MC)	47kohm/250pF / 42ohm (High)
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV, MM/MC)	12.1mV / 614µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD, MM/MC)	163mV / 8.6mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	13V (1.1kohm o/p impedance)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV, MM/MC)	80.0dB / 76.3dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.21dB to -0.42dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.006-0.01%
Power consumption	9W
Dimensions (WHD)	260x100x250mm

AUDIO
FILE

MM/MC phono preamp with switchable gain
 Made by: Canor Audio spol., Slovakia
 Supplied by: Sound Foundations, UK
 Telephone: 01276 501392
 Web: www.canor-audio.com; www.soundfoundations.co.uk
 Price: £2750



Canor TP306 VR+

You can't help but be impressed by Canor's house styling, distinctive yet unfussy with its black acrylic panel set into the fascia, within which various indicator lights and displays appear. And you can choose between the pleasingly sober charcoal finish seen here or go for the contrasting effect of a black band on brushed aluminium.

Naturally, the TP306 VR+ has the simplest fascia, as the only front-panel control is the on/standby button in the centre. When connected to mains power, LEDs show standby mode, muting while warming up, then unmuting.

Other adjustments are relegated to the back panel. But the facilities are comprehensive. There are separate pairs of input sockets for moving-coil and moving-magnet inputs, selected via a toggle switch,

as an output buffer, the combined MM/MC RIAA gain stage uses the bigger 6SL7 double-triodes, each run with its two triode sections connected in parallel. Transformers to provide the necessary step-up ahead of the MM input stage come from the leading specialist Lundahl of Sweden.

Canor's signature innovation is its Milling Technology where areas of the circuit board are precisely removed, leaving only the wanted track areas between key components. The result, says Canor, is 'to give the circuit similar characteristics to one direct wired with air-dielectric cables.'



A SENSE OF SPACE

We spent the most time listening to a Roksan Shiraz; MMs to hand included a budget Ortofon 2M Red, Rega Exact and the Goldring-based Roksan Corus Silver. Hans Richter-Haaser in Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto [CfP] was captivating, as the Canor gave the sound a pleasing transparency.

The piano shone out with sparkle and definition. The orchestral sound was inviting too, with a real feeling of scale and perspective.

For a shot of rhythm'n'blues, we put on Albert King's 1968 *Live Wire Blues Power* [Stax]. With this lucid phono stage you could feel the solid presence of Albert and his band on a stage, and at the same time sense the huge space around them. The image was so stable that its power

'You could feel the solid presence of Albert King and his band on stage'

the layout reflecting the dual-mono construction inside.

Accessed by removing a small cover plate, DIP switches provide all the loading options you could wish for: MC sensitivities at 54dB, 60dB or 66dB of gain; a set of six for load impedance. For MM, four switches provide capacitive loading – ten different settings cover the range from 100pF up to 890pF. While the familiar 6922 (E88CC) tube is used

ABOVE: Styled to match Canor's integrated amp and CD player, the fascia carries just a power switch. The rear panel layout reflects the dual-mono layout inside, while removing a small cover reveals DIP switches that give three gain settings and six load options for moving-coil, and capacitive loading for moving-magnet

never overwhelmed the system's ability to portray the venue.

Moving on to *The King James Version* [Sheffield Lab LAB 3] the Canor again seemed to allow a strikingly integrated and coherent sound. On 'Corner Pocket' the James band swung in happy harmony, though it seemed that the Canor laid bare that momentary slight equivocation over the tempo, not to mention the gain-riding by the engineer. This became all the more apparent by comparison with the following tracks, as the band plays absolutely as one on 'Lara's Theme' and then gives a truly fabulous performance on 'Cherokee'.

Turning to MM, the sound was still fine, lively and quite invigorating, but no longer had that tactile solid quality in the bass or the convincing dynamic impact from the drums that we'd enjoyed through the MC input.

We then put on Jennifer Warnes' album of Leonard Cohen songs, *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Classic Records]. On the title track, the torchy tenor sax was pleasantly softened while the rhythm section and strings provided a velvet cushion for the singer's fabulously expressive vocal. On 'Joan Of Arc', Jenny and Lenny were both right there in front of you, and producer Roscoe Beck's slide guitar was spine-chillingly effective: snaky and scaly.

VERDICT

Built in a way that inspires confidence, and behaving impeccably in use, the Canor TP306 VR+ certainly puts up a strong argument for tubes. It has a hint of character and can make most solid-state phono amps sound a little cool and almost impersonal. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM / MC)	47kohm/100-890pF / 5-2.4kohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV, MM/MC)	10mV / 1.82mV/923µV/501µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD, MM/MC)	300mV / 53mV/27mV/15mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	25V (32-2.4kohm o/p impedance)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV, MM/MC)	80.5dB / 79.8dB/80.7dB/80.4dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.8dB to +0.27dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.019-0.077%
Power consumption	50W
Dimensions (WHD)	435x122x350mm



MC valve phono stage
Made by: Tron Electric, Bucks
Supplied by: GT Audio, Bucks
Telephone: 01895 833099
Web: www.tron-electric.co.uk; www.gtaudio.com
Price: £9950

AUDIO
FILE



Tron Seven Phono GT

The GT version of the Tron Seven phono preamplifier marks the ultimate evolution of the series design. The range starts with a MM base model, with the MC variant next. The Reference model adds high quality resistors and capacitors; the Ultimate adds silver-wired MC transformers and 'four nines' silver internal wiring. It also has twin switched inputs, with MM/MC, or MC/MC options. Finally, the new GT adds a unique power supply configuration; and Tron claims that it offers a valve life of up to ten years in normal use thanks to its soft-start feature.

The PSU is housed in its own screened compartment within the enclosure and its connections pass through to the Seven GT's meticulously designed, multi-layer amplifier PCB. Further PCBs accommodate the input connection and gain stages, keeping hard wiring to a

loading is fixed and is quoted as 184ohm for the 24dB setting and 46ohm for the 30dB.

Input and output socketry quality is high while there is one of the most glorious earthing terminals we have encountered, plus small yet solid switches for gain, channel selection and earth lift. The power on/off switch is tucked just under the right hand side of the front panel.

SWATHES OF SOUND

With the Seven GT connected to a Michell Gyro SE turntable, SME 309 tonearm and Ortofon Kontrapunkt B cartridge, we selected the 24dB gain setting for the cartridge's rated 0.47mV output. Patience proved not only a virtue but a necessity with the Seven GT. Initial results were pleasant, but after a few weeks of continuous operation the transformation in performance was little short of astonishing.

Listening to both new records and well played favourites through the Seven GT was an absolute joy, as the unit has an uncanny ability

to present music as it is rarely heard. No matter what we chose, everything seemed to have an increased scale and taken a giant step forward in both dynamics and clarity.

A measured rise in output at higher frequencies undoubtedly helps here, but it is never overbearing and simply serves to ensure that 'warm and woolly'

ABOVE: An archetypal 'black box', GT Audio's Tron Seven is lit by a single, red power-on LED (any glow from the internal valves is hidden). The two input and single set of output RCAs are all silver-plated while the earth lift switch will be a useful facility in some systems. Internal gain and input loading may be customised

the GT most certainly is not. Cueing up 'Can't Get You Out Of My Head' from Kylie Minogue's new *Abbey Road Sessions* LP [Parlophone] we were enthralled by the size and depth perspective that the Tron conferred. Backing strings were gloriously vivid but without any sense of strain or screech. When the bass-drum came in, we nearly fell off our chairs! The rest of the album was no less delightful – the Tron's dynamic ebullience taking the experience to a whole new level.

As the Seven GT warmed up and hit its stride everything seemed to take on a whole new level of intimacy. Graham Tricker's design is uncannily free from background noise, so retrieval of fine subtleties at the furthest depths of recordings is rarely less than breathtaking.

Playing 'The Awakening Of A Woman' from the Cinematic Orchestra's *Man With A Movie Camera* [Ninja Tune] our listening room was filled with a huge swathe of sound – the word 'immersive' has never been more apt – and we were bombarded with musical information.

At the top end, the Seven GT has a captivating purity and articulation. The bass was beyond complaint as well. Not only was it astoundingly deep but blessed with fluency and pace.

VERDICT

This is one of the finest of current phono stages. It combines superb design, magnificent build quality, high quality components and a good dose of the Graham Tricker magic to create a veritable vinyl *tour de force*. ☺

'Our listening room was filled with a huge swathe of immersive sound'

minimum – important for the low noise required of such a design. Finally, all components are hand-matched, down to tolerances of 0.1% in some cases. The three triodes are the readily available 12AX7 and 12AU7s.

The GT is offered in MC format, albeit with two user-specified gain settings: +24dB and +30dB (plus +49dB fixed gain). Cartridge

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (mid/high gain)	195ohm / 48ohm
Input sensitivity (mid/high gain re. 0dBV)	233µV / 140µV
Input overload (mid/high gain)	5.9mV / 3.5mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	25.3V (600ohm o/p impedance)
A-wtd S/N ratio (mid/high gain)	75.5dB / 72.0dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-1.1dB to +2.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.027-0.12%
Power consumption	10W
Dimensions (WHD)	455x105x355mm

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Alan Sircom, HiFi+ Issue 99



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Tel. 01285 643088

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 Made by: Accuphase Laboratory Inc, Japan
 Supplied by: RT Services, Oxfordshire
 Telephone: 01235 810455
 Web: www.accuphase.com; www.rtsaudio.co.uk
 Price: £6000

AUDIO
FILE



Accuphase DP-510

Behind the gorgeous, old-fashioned fascia, Accuphase's DP-510 CD player is even more massively built than you'd expect. Much of its 17.8kg net weight is accounted for by the hefty base: a sandwich of resin between two steel plates, with cast iron feet. Vibration control measures are also a feature of the transport mechanism, which is founded on a sturdy base with a large rigid bridging cover piece attached and mounted on viscous dampers.

Classical in its simplicity, the layout of the front-panel places the usual Play, Pause, Back, Next and Stop controls to the right, visually balancing the big power on/off switch to the left. In the centre, large flanking buttons extend the visual line of the loading drawer to match the width of the display

'The player presented a huge soundstage with a solid, tactile quality'

above. The drawer emerges smoothly, quickly and almost silently. The button marked 'CD/Proc' switches between normal CD replay and 'processor' mode, in which the DAC accepts digital inputs from external sources.

More facilities are available on the RC-100 remote handset, eg, numeric keys for direct track entry, Fast Forward and Reverse for

searching within a track, Repeat and Program Play, and Time, to switch the display from elapsed to remaining track time, or total remaining time. There is no control for display brightness.

Unusually, however, there are keys to search for index points on a CD. Finally, a digital level control gives 0 to -60dB attenuation of the analogue output for system matching. This is not meant to be used as a volume control and is normally best left in the maximum 0dB position.

Rear panel analogue output is available via phono or balanced, via XLRs and a phase switch caters for reversed XLR polarity. There are digital outputs from the transport as well as digital inputs to the processor section, with coaxial and optical options for both.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the Accuphase DP-510 does not provide a USB digital input.



SMOOTHNESS

Starting with Marta Gomez's *Entre Cada Palabra* [Chesky JD301],

we were intrigued to see how the Accuphase would deliver the spatial effects of Chesky's church recording venue. To be picky, although the Accuphase did deliver the spatial clues that tell you how big – and particularly how deep – the recorded acoustic is, we felt that the sense of space was something you had to listen for, rather than being presented effortlessly. Yet the

ABOVE: A clean, symmetrical layout around the central transport drawer gives this big player a stately look. Gold metalwork and green-lit logo are the hallmarks of the brand. The DP-510 features both digital outputs and inputs, although there's no USB fitted. Both RCA and balanced XLR analogue outs are included, the latter with switchable phase

Accuphase delivered a smooth and entirely engaging sound.

And with Dylan's *Blood On The Tracks* [Columbia], the player really did present a huge, convincing soundstage, with a solid, tactile quality that gave force to the songs. In 'Simple Twist Of Fate' the timbre of the acoustic guitar was ear-catching, and Dylan's go-for-broke vocal filled the centre of the stage with maximum expression.

Moving on to Florence And The Machine with *Lungs* [Island/Moshi Moshi], the DP-510 was impressively clear and detailed. On the opening of 'Dog Days Are Over' the synthed handclaps sounded really crisp, with a great sense of presence to Florence's vocal. 'Rabbit Heart' revealed the player's ability to reproduce deep and clean bass too.

Turning to orchestral music, we found Respighi's *Church Windows* [Reference Recordings] somehow seemed to suit the DP-510 down to the ground, as 'The Flight Into Egypt' steadily unfolded with a kind of stately mystery. There was a fine natural quality to the strings, and a good feeling of space, underpinned by a deep but unexaggerated bass.

Mitsuko Uchida and Debussy's *Twelve Etudes* [Philips] can be a challenging CD, as the bright sound of the piano audibly ricochets around the reverberant Snape Maltings acoustic, but here the DP-510 easily negotiated this music's extreme contrasts.

VERDICT

This heavyweight player offers superb engineering and build quality. It sounds excellent, its great virtues being smoothness, balance and consistent listenability. It sets a standard that's hard to fault. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	2.47Vrms at 47-53ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD / S/PDIF in)	110.0dB / 109.3dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00016% / 0.00019%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00038% / 0.012%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.00dB to -0.07dB
Digital jitter (CD / S/PDIF in)	114psec / 123psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD / S/PDIF in)	±0.2dB / ±0.3dB
Power consumption	13W
Dimensions (WHD)	465x151x393mm

AUDIO
FILE

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 Made by: Audio Research Corp, Minnesota, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.audioresearch.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £11,995



Audio Research Reference CD9

This is a replacement for the four-year-old CD8, which can serve as a standalone player, a transport-only front-end thanks to digital outputs, and – most importantly – a ‘digital media bridge’ of sorts, like the processor-only REF DAC.

Looking at it primarily as a CD player, there’s a valve-based analogue section and valve power supply regulation, the tube complement totalling five 6H30s and one 6550C. As it’s a top-loader you cannot put anything on top which would hamper its ventilation. CDs are held in place on the Philips PRO2R transport with a light puck.

To ensure the highest standard of playback beyond the CD element

and balanced XLR outputs, and mains input.

Via remote, you can select sample rate conversion for all digital inputs as well as CD; and there are selectable digital filter settings. These are shown as vertical fascia displays together with Fast or Slow Filter, Upsample and Power.

Below the LED displays are seven metal control buttons (L to R): Power on/off, followed by transport controls, Previous, Play, Next, Pause, and Stop, followed by Input.



HEARING A DIFFERENCE

Audio Research believes that digital sources can be *optimised*. Experimenting with the user-adjustable parameters provided varying results from CD to CD: it was not always a case of simply setting everything to what one assumed was the best. Many CDs sounded more lifelike and natural

with native resolution than via upsampling, but it differed from disc to disc (and even remastered editions of the same recording).

Determining which filter to use was less straightforward. We dug out pairs of CDs, such as 2000/2012 versions of The Beach Boys’ sublime *Surf’s Up* [Capitol] and they sounded sufficiently dissimilar to call for deft use of the remote.

ABOVE: CD top-loading allows plenty of real estate for a conventional display and row of transport controls, as well as 15 LEDs to show sampling rate, chosen input and digital filter choices. Rear XLR and RCA analogue outputs are joined by USB, optical and coaxial S/PDIF and one AES/EBU digital input; digital outs are offered too

While for many readers USB will prove not just an attractive option, but a crucially important inclusion, it was clear that the sound of this player with CDs was *generally* of a superior level to what we heard via USB – with or without upsampling – and 24-bit/48kHz USB audio delivered via an iMac and Mac Air did not sound better than the CD9’s on-board disc player.

But with high-res downloads played through a worthy program we found that material such as the 24-bit Beatles recordings (available only in the form of a USB stick) and the ‘free’ 96/24 download provided with McCartney’s *Band On The Run* reissue [MPL/Concord Music] sounded spectacular. They had the edge over CD by exhibiting smoother transient decay, reduced sibilants and more punch.

Returning to CDs, it was reassuring to confirm our initial reaction to the player’s seductive silkiness. We played Lou Rawls’ ‘At Last’ from the CD of the same name [Blue Note]. The opening piano, followed by a sliding note on guitar sounded glassine-translucent without being brittle, tinkly without sounding thin. Of course, it serves as the backing for two of the strongest voices ever to pair on disc: Rawls’ rich-as-Amarone depths with Dianne Reeves’ near-operatic soaring. Their call-and-response sections positioned the two singers with uncanny presence.

VERDICT

Top-loader or not, this is one of the finest players we have ever heard. Regardless of parameter – textures, space, attack, neutrality – the REF CD9 truly excels. The lack of artifice is as good as it gets. ☺

‘Lou Rawls and Dianne Reeves were positioned with uncanny presence’

the CD9 accepts asynchronous USB 2.0, AES/EBU, RCA and Toslink digital inputs, compatible with data up to 24-bit/192kHz on all inputs. ARC’s supplied software CD enables you to use the USB 2.0 input with both Windows and Mac systems.

Facilitating further practicality, the back contains, as well as the digital inputs, AES/EBU and BNC digital outputs, single-ended RCA

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.78Vrms at 300-520ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	105.7dB/106.0dB/105.8dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0135% / 0.0002%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.012% / 0.0015%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz Fast/Slow filter)	+0.0dB to -0.50dB/-3.5dB
Digital jitter (CD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	122psec / 140psec / 25psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD / S/PDIF input)	±1.0dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	108W
Dimensions (WHD)	480x134x390mm

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 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.metronome-technologie.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £8800



Metronome T3A Signature

Metronome's T3A Signature CD transport, despite its not inconsiderable price, is substantially more affordable than the company's 'sculpted art' Kalista and Calypso models.

It's a manual top-loader with an integrated power supply, housed in a sturdy chassis with a thick fascia of brushed aluminium available in silver or black. The unit sits on three substantial feet with circular recesses, into which inverted Delrin cones magnetically locate for maximum isolation from any external vibration.

Sliding back the top plate cover of the T3A to load a CD reveals its transport mechanism, a Philips CDM12 Pro 2 v6.8. CDs are secured in place by a magnetic clamping puck also in Delrin. Metronome

'Tonal individuality was carefully preserved as recorded levels maxed'

modifies the mechanism with a stainless steel shaft, designed to afford improved disc stability and minimise jitter, while also providing a continuous ground-link from the disc's surface to electrical earth. It says this can eliminate parasitic electrostatic fields generated by the spinning discs.

The T3A has an elaborate power supply employing three toroidal

transformers and independent regulation lines for each critical part of the transport – laser pick-up, servo, and control functions – which Metronome says ensures 'a dynamic, analogue-like sound'.

There are three digital outputs at the rear to feed to your DAC of choice: S/PDIF (gold-plated RCA), AES/EBU (XLR) and – soon to be replaced by Toslink – ST optical.

PEELING BACK LAYERS

We used the T3A in combination with our resident T+A DAC 8 [HFN Oct '12], trying both AES/EBU and S/PDIF interfaces. We perceived subtle differences between these two connections, no doubt attributable to cable choice.

Using a 110ohm Nordost Tyr XLR interconnect the sound appeared 'fast' and light in balance; with a 75ohm Atlas Mavros RCA cable the sound was subjectively warmer, and more full-bodied.

The 1985 album *Three-Way Mirror* [Reference Recordings]

by Brazilian percussionist Airto Moreira and his wife Flora Purim performing with American saxophonist and flautist Joe Farrell is a vivid and dynamic recording containing layer upon layer of fine detail. The soundstage here was wide and immensely deep, the tonal individuality of the instruments within it seeming to be carefully preserved even as the recorded

levels maxed out during the more boisterous passages.

This is where many digital source components can fall down, individual sound elements melding into a 'mash' at high levels, and appearing as if the spaces in the frequency spectrum had been filled with intermodulation products. With the T3A/T+A DAC 8 instruments appeared clearly separated and the sound was indeed relaxed and easy to decipher. Subjectively, the music appeared to develop almost languidly, enhancing nuance and detail yet never appearing over-etched or clinical.

Drummer Bill Bruford's prog jazz/rock/fusion album *One Of A Kind* [EG Records] is a densely packed production typically sounding thick and hard to decipher. Yet it presented a fine example of the Metronome's ability to peel back layers, stripping apart the virtuoso musicians' breathtaking performances. Clarity and focus were nothing short of stunning.

The depth, control, pitch definition and detail delivered by the Metronome exceeded all expectations from this pretty average recording. Rather than serving up merely a blur of low-frequency information, this CD front-end snapped tight the lower registers with an astonishing clarity.

VERDICT

The T3A Signature can be highly recommended. While it might not have the visual 'wow' factor of Metronome's cost-no-object audio sculptures this more conventional-looking transport is exceptionally well made and will deliver fabulous sound quality. ☺

ABOVE: Disc navigation – Play, Stop/Pause, Previous and Next – is via chromed buttons on the T3A Signature transport's top plate. At the rear, Metronome offers three digital outputs – electrical as S/PDIF (on RCA) and AES/EBU (on XLR) and optical via high-speed AT&T

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (S/PDIF)	1.225Vpk-pk into 75ohm
Digital edge risetime (S/PDIF)	55nsecs
Digital output impedance (S/PDIF)	170ohm
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00007% / 0.0034%
Clock accuracy	-0.1ppm
Digital jitter (S/PDIF)	114psec (16-bit limit)
Resolution @ -100dB (S/PDIF)	±0.4dB
Power consumption	9W
Dimensions (WHD)	450x85x435mm



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Cambridge Audio Azur 752BD

The 752BD is an evolution of Cambridge's successful 751BD [HFN Aug '11]. There's now an HDMI input on the front and the legends have gone from bright white to subtle grey, but they are otherwise identical twins. The 752BD is based on the popular MediaTek platform whose current incarnation includes the latest Marvell Qdeo video processor, giving the 752BD 4K upscaling, 2D to 3D conversion and 24fps conversion for DVDs and Blu-ray movies.

Sonically too, much of the new machine is a direct port over from its predecessor. It has the same Cambridge Audio-designed switch-mode power supply, the five-strong

Its various inputs and (variable) analogue outputs turn a humble disc spinner into a digital media hub and preamp. Alongside analogue and coaxial S/PDIF ins and outs, you get two HDMI inputs, one with MHL compatibility for direct video streaming from a mobile device. There are two HDMI outputs both capable of handling your TV's sound via HDMI's Audio Return Channel (ARC) and three standard USB inputs, with one on the fascia.

Although the 752BD lacks an asynchronous USB input for direct connection to your PC, you can stream pretty much any audio format via UPnP or DNLA networks over its hardwire Ethernet connection or the supplied USB

Wi-Fi dongle. All of the analogue connections can be set to fixed line-level or via a 100-step variable output. In fact the only significant omission is a balanced

XLR out. Setup is pretty logical while CA's instruction manual is unquestionably the best in class.



MARVELLOUS PICTURE

There is not a great deal to say about the 752BD's stunning picture performance except it's up there with the very best, largely thanks to Marvell's latest video processor. Tough diagonal pans

'The 752BD's stunning picture performance is up there with the very best'

line-up of Wolfson WM8740 DACs and second-gen Adaptive Time Filtering (ATF2) upsampling technology. ATF2 upsamples all incoming digital audio signals to 24-bit/192kHz with three selectable digital filters.

The new remote (with stand) is nicely weighted and very well finished. The back-light perfectly illuminates the legends on the keys.

are seamlessly smooth and colour rendition is deeply saturated but not cartoonish.

FOOT-TAPPING PLAYER

Unsurprisingly the 752BD has a very similar sonic balance to the 751BD: rich, expressive and detailed. It is a very balanced and even-handed sound and, with CD playback in particular, perhaps a little more taut and focused than its predecessor.

The top end is a particular strength, the player easily eking out the texture of the brush-struck cymbals throughout Beverly Craven's eponymous first album, for example. And with SACD playback. The 752BD handles the format's resolution and the wanton HF of some SACDs with a balanced musicality throughout. This is a foot-tapping player, one that 'disappears into the music' rather than preening itself with its own hi-fi-ness.

VERDICT

Another winner from CA, the 752BD boasts a feast of features and top-flight video performance. The sound has an even-handed balance and spirited presentation. The 752BD will take some beating! ☺

ABOVE: The subtly restyled 752BD's inputs include two HDMI (front and back), three USB (front and back), coax/optical S/PDIF plus Ethernet. There are now two HDMI outputs (no component/composite video) with 7.1 channel plus stereo RCA analogue audio outputs

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level/impedance	2.05Vrms / 416ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD / DVD, BD, S/PDIF)	105.9dB / 107.9dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0005% / 0.0025%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0025% / 0.0025%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.00dB to -0.17dB
Digital jitter (CD/SACD/BD/ S/PDIF)	120 / 48 / 35 / 315psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD/SACD/ S/PDIF)	±0.9dB / ±0.3dB / ±5.0dB
Power consumption	15W (<1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	430x85x312mm



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Oppo BDP-105EU

Oppo's new BDP-105EU is a universal disc-spinning, network-streaming, digital hub, processor, preamp and audiophile DAC all rolled into one chunky and imposing package. The lush 32-bit ESS Sabre DACs from the BDP-95EU remain, and you can now feed these from the disc drawer, coaxial and electrical S/PDIF digital inputs, three type A USB sockets, front and rear HDMI sockets, wired Ethernet or Wi-Fi, using the supplied dongle.

While the '95EU's e-SATA port has been deleted, this machine now leverages Audio Return Channel to input audio from ARC-compatible devices, such as a TV, connected to either of the twin HDMI outputs. The inclusion of an asynchronous

Block or Common Internet File System protocol. Mobile High-Definition Link input via the front HDMI port supports a range of smartphones and tablet devices, allowing playback of HD video media while simultaneously charging the device.

Oppo has gone to some lengths to deliver serious audiophile performance. Its revised heavyweight chassis has passive cooling and the high-current toroidal power supply was designed specifically for this machine. (Needless to say, there's a headphone socket.) For all stereo sources the BDP-105EU has a fully-balanced analogue stereo board, driven by its own dedicated 32-bit ES9018 Sabre DAC. The audio menu allows swapping between fixed line-level or variable output from all of the analogue connections, including the stereo XLRs. The player's volume control is handled in the digital

domain and is silky-smooth without any nasty thumps, pops or clicks.



PICKING UP THE PACE

In operation the BDP-105EU is blissfully silent and goes from standby to 'ready' with considerable alacrity. With audio connected through the multichannel RCA and stereo XLR outputs, the general balance is very similar to the excellent BDP-95EU, majoring on a crisp and detailed presentation with excellent transient attack. The

sound offers great insight, even with recordings that are a little thicker than ideal.

The Who's *Quadrophenia* on CD falls squarely into that category. It can sound a little flat, yet the Oppo really allows the music to breathe into life. There is fabulous separation through the multi-track vocal harmonies, with the tiniest details building a picture of each voice in the mix. The Oppo picks up the pace with gusto. The fast drum solo that starts 'Bell Boy' charges from the speakers with plenty of '70s rock band energy. The low frequency registers are drum-skin tight with little overhang and no mid-bass bloom.

With a 24-bit/96kHz FLAC recording by Eleanor McEvoy the sense of space and presence created was tangible, the sound thrillingly taut with McEvoy's voice leaping from the speakers with astounding realism. Each enunciation was precision-machined into the soundstage and every note of her guitar rich with the instrument's woody character. If you ever wanted conclusive proof that high-res computer audio is where high-fidelity music needs to be going, then Oppo's BDP-105EU universal player is it.

Blu-ray picture quality is stunning in 2D or 3D and SACDs are a revelation in punchy colour, giving music a dynamic realism that is utterly addictive.

VERDICT

The BDP-105EU is a fabulous piece of digital engineering that offers spectacular value. It delivers breathtaking clarity and detailing the like of which many high-end CD players will struggle to achieve. ☺

ABOVE: The grey fascia is no more comely with age or increased size, but the front HDMI input and a headphone output mark it functionally superior to its predecessor. Inputs now include HDMI, two USB and coax/optical S/PDIF plus Ethernet. There are now two HDMI outputs with 7.1 channel plus stereo RCA and balanced XLR analogue audio outs

'McEvoy's voice leapt from the speakers with astounding realism'

type B USB input allows the '105EU to be hooked direct to your PC, and the Oppo is capable of decoding pretty much any common audio format up to 192kHz/24-bit FLAC.

This machine's networking abilities are at the cutting edge of AV hardware from any manufacturer. It handles both Digital Media Player and Digital Media Renderer type DLNA functions and can access local network media files shared by computers via the Server Message

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level/impedance	4.40Vrms/97ohm (XLR out)
A-wtd S/N ratio (XLR / RCA)	115.9dB / 108.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00004% / 0.0002%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00025% / 0.00035%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.00dB to -0.09dB
Digital jitter (CD/SACD/BD/ S/PDIF)	117 / 22 / 12 / 210psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD/SACD/ S/PDIF)	±0.2dB / ±0.1dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	50W (<1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	430x123x311mm



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Marantz NA-11S1

Marantz's NA-11S1 is similar in functionality to its more affordable stablemate, the NA7004 streamer, in the sense that it's effectively a DAC that also offers media streaming via Ethernet. But this new high-end design introduces the latest 'Marantz Music Mastering' digital signal processing and the option to play Direct Stream Digital (DSD) from a computer via USB.

In addition to its rather niche DSD functionality, the unit also plays PCM at up to 24-bit/192kHz resolution (digital input and format permitting), in WAV, WMA, MP3, MPEG-4, FLAC and ALAC flavours. This comes into the unit via optical (up to 96kHz), RJ-45 LAN (Ethernet) or USB Type A and B connections. There's also Apple AirPlay

'DSD performance was clean and open, with a lilting unforced quality'

connectivity, so you can wirelessly stream music from your computer or iDevice at Apple Lossless quality.

Marantz has chosen the popular BridgeCo network platform here. Ken Ishiwata says this is partly because it offers Apple AirPlay, and also because the company has employed it extensively in its range of AV receivers.

If you ever wondered where all the world's copper reserves had gone, then look no further than the

casework: lots of it comes inside each NA-11S1, from the plated chassis cladding to the multiple secondary windings of the beefy toroidal transformer, itself in a copper-coated enclosure.

The power supplies, streaming board, DAC section and analogue output stages are each segregated from one another and the latter is fully balanced, and sports Marantz's HDAM-SA2 and HDAM modules. The unit uses carefully selected passive componentry, and there's a separate section incorporating a dedicated headphone amplifier with analogue volume control.

The unit is immaculately finished, and its sculpted fascia sports Marantz's corporate design flourish with blue 'mood lighting' pouring from the central pillar. Ergonomically it is straightforward, with the main functions – track and input selection – given their own buttons, and the rest is left to a menu. Like the fascia display, the remote

disappoints – the front panel is a dog's dinner of fiddly buttons, and it's part metal, part plastic.

TRADEMARK SOUND

Regardless of input, the NA-11S1 proved an extremely able performer with Marantz's trademark clean, crisp and open sound. Working in DAC mode with a Cyrus transport connected via the electrical coaxial input, this big black box gingerly trod the delicate path between

ABOVE: The NA-11S1's small display does it no favours, and the menu navigation is fiddly. At the rear, balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) analogue outputs are joined by USB, S/PDIF (coax and optical inputs and outputs) and wired Ethernet 'digital' connections

euphonic and forensic. As a rule, it proved agnostic about the type of programme material used.


It's a strong performer at its price then, as evinced by the beautiful sound it squeezed from a CD of Isaac Hayes' *Shaft: Original Soundtrack* [Stax]. 'Cafe Regios' proved an amazing auditory experience, with a large and vibrant recorded acoustic inside which the instruments were locked tightly. The soundstage didn't fall back far, but still the music gave the feeling of being hewn from granite.

The bass was strong and sinewy rather than plump and overblown, with no sense of rhythmic slurring. Tonally it proved quite even, with just the slightest glint across the upper midband and treble, making for a light, breezy, open window into the music.

Hi-res files streamed from a NAS drive really stepped up a gear. Wings' *Band On The Run* at 24-bit/96kHz was bubbling with detail; electric guitars were deliciously crisp and natural, combining a raw edge with a lovely tonal richness.

The NA-11S1's DSD performance proved superlative. Alex de Grassi's *The Water Garden* [Blue Coast Records] was exceptionally clean and open, yet blessed with a beautifully lilting, unforced quality. The acoustic guitar work was effortless and tonally sublime.

VERDICT

Marantz's new NA-11S1 shows just what is possible from modern high-res digital sources. It has a plethora of facilities, including stable streaming and USB provision, and is beautifully built. Its subtle, smooth and intricately detailed sound sets an enviable standard. 

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (balanced)	4.7Vrms at 45-49ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / network)	114.0dB / 113.7dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0002% / 0.00009%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0008% / 0.0038%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	0dB to -3.4dB/-5.7dB/-10.9dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / network)	33psec / 82psec
Res. @ -100dB (S/PDIF / network)	±0.2dB / ±0.4dB
Power consumption	30W (3W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	420x88x355mm



Outboard DAC with S/PDIF, AES/EBU and USB inputs
 Made by: MBL Akustikgeräte GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin
 Supplied by: Audio Emotion Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 01333 425999
 Web: www.mbl.de/en; www.audioemotion.co.uk
 Price: £7920

AUDIO
FILE



MBL 1511F

Welcome to a world of truly luxurious audio. As it costs as much as many hi-fi enthusiasts' entire music systems, you'd be right to assume this MBL D-to-A converter aspires to being 'up there' with the best of them... Almost the size of our Mark Levinson amp, the 16kg 1511F is built around a substantial metal chassis with brushed aluminium panels and polished acrylic trim pieces. It sports five digital inputs and three line outputs (one balanced and two single-ended).

The 1511F's front panel houses a large VFD status panel flanked by two rows of control buttons that govern input selection, standby, mute, and allow setting of the display brightness in seven steps (including off). A button labelled True Audio disables the DAC's

'The aggressive zing of electric piano seemed particularly authentic'

error correction circuits and it is recommended that it is engaged 'for maximum sound quality'.

The 1511F's inputs are all limited to accepting data up to 24-bit/96kHz, which might disappoint some. But, ultimately, one must conclude it is the sound quality performance of a DAC – and its true ability to offer substantially-better-than-CD resolution with hi-res

recordings – that's paramount, not the numbers on its spec sheets.

On this topic, MBL's Jürgen Reis says: 'We did in fact intend to make the F version of the 1511 24/192-capable, but I was not happy with the sound because the bass lacked some punch and the midrange was missing some definition.'

ANALOGUE APPEAL

Listening via balanced (XLR) connection to a Mark Levinson No.383 amplifier and Townshend monitors we thought the 1511F sounded richly textured and colourful. In some ways you could describe the sound character as an analogue lover's delight – inasmuch as it's pungent and meaty, with an invitingly warm midrange and super-smooth treble quality. There was certainly no sharp-edged 'digital hardness' to be heard here.

Even when playing barren, clinical-sounding recordings, the 1511F unquestionably seduced us with its charms; we judged the DAC to be beautifully balanced. The bass was bold and punchy while remaining always to appear 'calm', self-assured and even-handed.

Favourite rock and jazz/rock recordings (countless live Zappa albums, alongside 1970s-vintage live performances of Focus and Ian Carr's Nucleus, for example) were delivered with immediacy and delicacy in equal measure, together with outstanding dynamic qualities.

ABOVE: Blue VFD shows incoming USB sampling frequency. With the other inputs it reads CD when data is seen to be 44.1kHz, DVD-V if 48kHz and DVD-A if 88.2kHz or 96kHz. The interior is a work of art comprising full-sized and surface-mount components together with Crystal's popular CS4398 DAC. There are status LEDs for power, error, mute and de-emphasis

We can't concur wholly with Reis's description of the 1511F as sounding 'more analogue and relaxed' than his C31 player/DAC [HFN Sept '12], since we had found the C31 exceptionally smooth and luscious-sounding. The 1511F sounds less creamy and more tightly-focused, with better transparency thanks to its 'blacker blacks'. It certainly sounded more open with Patricia Barber's *Companion* live set from 1999 [Blue Note/Premonition]. The 1511F paints better holographic images, with a deeper and more lifelike sense of three-dimensionality.

We were knocked for six by the way it remained composed while tracking the dynamic contrasts throughout the song 'GiornoNotte' from Alice Pella's *Little Dream* album [Suono Records]. The combination of the electric piano's energy and its aggressive zing seemed particularly authentic, while the muted trumpet displayed just the right amount of body and searing blast.

We were also carried away by Otis Redding's timeless 'Sittin' On The Dock Of The Bay' from his posthumous 1968 *Dock Of The Bay* album [24/96 download, HDtracks]. The way in which the 1511F presented images was glorious, instruments emanating from a black background and portrayed vividly in space, the layering of drum kit, electric guitar and accompanying instruments clearly depicted.

VERDICT

MBL's 1511F DAC is indeed 'up there'. Its ability to paint spookily realistic images out of silence is fabulous, while its build quality shows carefully considered engineering both inside and out. ⬇

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (balanced)	3.93Vrms at 96ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	113.1dB / 113.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00009% / 0.00016%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00025% / 0.00049%
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz)	+0.0dB to -3.0dB/-3.5dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)	580psec / 300psec / 190psec
Resolution @ -100dB (S/PDIF / USB)	±0.2dB / ±0.9dB
Power consumption	19W
Dimensions (WHD)	450x113x425mm

AUDIO
FILE

Outboard USB & S/PDIF DAC
 Made by: Metrum Acoustics/All Engineering BV, The Netherlands
 Supplied by: iStereos Ltd
 Telephone: 01255 676 222
 Web: www.nosminidac.nl; www.istereos.co.uk
 Price: £2660 (inc USB input)



Metrum Acoustics HEX

Metrum Acoustics outboard DACs offer a specific appeal by implementing a no-frills approach to cosmetic design while cracking the DAC nut in a wholly bespoke fashion. The range, including this flagship HEX, eschews off-the shelf chipsets and are all non-oversampling [NOS] designs.

Designer Cees Ruijtenberg was convinced higher audio performance could be achieved by using cutting-edge industrial application chipsets rather than traditional audio components. After much experimentation and listening, a suitable high-speed data acquisition chipset was identified that the company suggests handles

'The opening drum roll to "Hello I Love You" was wonderfully dynamic'

24-bit audio and sampling rates well in excess of the hi-fi standards.

The HEX is so named as it uses no fewer than 16 of these chips, eight per channel, and runs in dual-differential balanced mode. The whole design is pure dual mono from the power supplies onwards, with each channel on its own individual board. Paralleling multiple DACs per channel is said to improve

low-level information while reducing the noise floor, and this philosophy is an inherent part of the Metrum Range. Of course, using chips designed for industrial applications rather than audio has meant some additional work in interfacing silicon with audio features and circuits.

On the outside, Metrum's DACs have looked more functional than works of art. Thankfully the HEX does throw off much of the 'hand-assembled in dark shed' look, mixing a plain case with a heavy textured aluminium fascia.

As standard, £2499 gets you optical and electrical S/PDIF inputs and balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA outputs, with AES/EBU and asynchronous USB inputs both a

£163 optional extra. The USB interface is an off-the shelf unit from M2Tech but is fed from the HEX's 15V toroidal PSU to ensure it is working at its very best.



JUST SUBLIME

Metrum recommends something like 20 days of run-in time and our sample became ever more fluid and musical as time went on. Indeed, the HEX is a sublimely musical DAC, mixing a smooth balance with an addictive energy that digs deep into the heart of the music. It comes across as a DAC with a purpose,

delivering an engaging sound that thoroughly belies its price tag with source material from CD quality on up to full 24-bit/192kHz high-res.

With CD-format material via USB or S/PDIF it has a sophisticated and mature sound with superb intonation through the midband. This pushes key vocals nicely out into the front of the soundstage and its resolution throughout this part of the spectrum is up with the best.

The top end remains on the safe side of neutral, making for a warm and appealing sound. With CD material, top-end dynamics are a little restrained, however. Up the format resolution and the HEX gets even better. While the coaxial S/PDIF inputs will accept 192kHz material perhaps most users will still feed it high-res audio via USB.

With a 192kHz/24-bit remaster from HDtracks of The Doors' *Waiting For The Sun* the Metrum stepped up to the task with aplomb. The opening drum roll to 'Hello I Love You' was wonderfully edgy and dynamic, and Morrison's voice was crafted right there in the room.

The HEX tracked the pace of the music like a bloodhound, keeping everything rhythmically engaging and alive. Keyboard effects had superb positioning in the mix and the presentation gave no clue as to the age of the recording.

VERDICT

The HEX is a novel DAC with an engaging sound that gets better with higher-res audio. It is a little shy of top-end sparkle with CDs but is forgiving of poor recordings. The HEX shines with 96kHz media and is stunning with 192kHz material. Great value and a 'must-hear' DAC for the high-res enthusiast. ☺

ABOVE: The Hex's homely fascia is chunky aluminium with heavily textured paint finish and plastic buttons. Blue LEDs flash if the source is selected while nothing is connected. At the rear, balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) analogue outs are joined by AES/EBU (XLR) and USB digital inputs alongside two Toslink optical and two coaxial S/PDIF

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.20Vrms at 86ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	99.4dB / 96.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.029% / 0.052%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.090% / 0.011%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to -2.75dB/-3.8dB/-4.5dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)	950psec / 490psec / 80psec
Resolution @ -100dB	N/A (see text) / ±0.6dB
Power consumption	13W
Dimensions (WHD)	320x85x320mm

Goliath, Meet David.

This legend is more than just a shot in the dark. Crafted with the same high-gloss wood finishes and sensuous curves, combined with state-of-the-art driver technology and cabinet construction, the Imagine mini and Imagine T2 might sound like the classic underdog tale but it isn't. Both are cut from the same stone for an equally seamless 'true-to-nature' performance full of rich musical detail.

PSB Imagine mini



PSB Imagine T2



AUDIO
FILE

Outboard DAC with USB/Bluetooth inputs
 Made by: Musical Fidelity Ltd, Wembley
 Supplied by: Musical Fidelity Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 900 2866
 Web: www.musicalfidelity.com
 Price: £2000



Musical Fidelity M6

This is a luxurious hi-fi DAC which sets out to cover all possible bases. It's really designed to be a comprehensive processor for all digital sources, with almost every possible input/output option.

And to complete the M6 DAC's capabilities, Musical Fidelity has also included Bluetooth, which means that you can play music files wirelessly from any recent Bluetooth-enabled phone or other device, without involving your main home computer wireless network.

Current Bluetooth devices use the APTX codec instead of the earlier SBC lossy compression, and this has perhaps encouraged hi-fi manufacturers to take it more seriously. Antony Michaelson became enthused about Bluetooth through using the Soundmatters

'This was a rather complicated way just to receive a broadcast!'

FoxL portable products, so much so that MF became its UK distributor.

The M6 comes complete with a remote handset, with 14 buttons dedicated to the M6 DAC, duplicating the neat array of controls on the M6's solid alloy fascia. Here, six buttons provide input selection; two more are De-Emph, which enables or disables automatic de-emphasis of source material that requires it, and Filter, which gives a choice of two digital

filter characteristics. The two arrow-shaped buttons can be used to trim the signal level up or down for each source to match their output levels.

At the back, you will find an impressive plethora of socketry [see caption]. Setting up and using the M6 is truly painless for both USB and Bluetooth. All you need to do is to 'pair' your transmitting device with the M6 DAC as the receiver, entering the M6's password if asked. The M6 automatically uses APTX if the transmitting device is using it, as indeed all Apple products have done since the launch of OS X 10.6.

SEAMLESS LISTENING
 We started with Gwyneth Herbert's *Clangers And Mash* [Naim Label] and her perky 'Perfect Fit (Original Version)'. Using a Rega Apollo player as a transport, it didn't take

long to conclude that in this mode the M6 was indeed a very fine-sounding DAC. It was neutral and transparent, giving a sound that was always satisfyingly detailed and impeccably

smooth. Playing the same music from an uncompressed AIFF file via the USB input, the M6 displayed most of the same virtues, giving a seamlessly listenable performance. Via the Bluetooth wireless link, we must admit that the music came over nearly as well, with not much identifiable loss. It often seemed smoother and less stressed than the more 'accurate' USB.

Nevertheless, with the jazz classic *Art Pepper Meets The*

ABOVE: Input switching and other functions are available on the front panel as well as on the remote. Display brightness is only controllable from the remote handset. Two coaxial, one optical (S/PDIF) and XLR (AES/EBU) digital inputs are joined by a USB 1.0/2.0 port. There are matching digital outputs plus both single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) audio outs

Rhythm Section [Contemporary] the M6 via USB really managed to convey the gripping, cliff-hanging quality of the alto saxist's solos, flashes of genius shining through.

Moving on to 24-bit/192kHz material, we weren't disappointed. On an excerpt from a Tony Faulkner master recording of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*, the M6 clearly revealed the hi-res benefits. There was a fabulous sense of space around the instruments, a feeling of truly effortless dynamics, and a transparency that gave truth to instrumental timbres, like the beautifully layered string sound or tingling realism of the brass.

Finally, we listened to Radio 3 via the BBC Radio Player, with a lunchtime concert presented in the BBC's so-called 'High Definition sound'. Entering the house on the ADSL phone line, the internet stream was being transmitted from a wireless router to a MacBook. From there, the AAC digital audio was sent wirelessly via Bluetooth and its codec to the Musical Fidelity M6, which decoded the digits and fed the analogue signal faultlessly to the amplifier and speakers.

As the sombre yet gorgeous tones of Puccini's *Chrysanthemums* filled the room, we reflected that this was a strange and rather complicated procedure just to receive a radio broadcast. But it was still a great way to enjoy the music!

VERDICT

With excellent performance at a less than high-end price, the M6 DAC is great for hi-res, while for less critical listening the convenience of Bluetooth will be appreciated by anyone who carries music around in a portable device. Ⓟ

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	3.98Vrms at 47ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	114.5dB / 114.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00089% / 0.00012%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0012% / 0.0019%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to +0.1dB/-0.7dB/-5.1dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)	11psec / 10psec / 15psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x102x380mm

"the P10 will have an effect ranging from positive to positively startling". **Hi-Fi News**



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on 07738 007776 or email info@signaturesystems.co.uk
www.signaturesystems.co.uk

AUDIO
FILE

Network media server/preamp, USB & S/PDIF DAC
Made by: Audio Research Corp, Minnesota, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.audioresearch.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £14,000



Audio Research Reference DAC

Audio Research's first DAC to bear the 'Reference' name incorporates a network music player with access to internet radio stations, USB inputs for direct playback of files from memory sticks and HDDs, and a digital connection for iDevices. The Reference DAC is also an audiophile-grade vacuum tube preamplifier (albeit one with no analogue inputs).

Its type B USB rear input socket – into which one can simply push digital data from a connected computer – provides an asynchronous interface that's compatible with files up to 'full HD' 24-bit resolution and all sampling frequencies up to 192kHz. (Drivers

controller. This can also switch absolute phase, control the preamp's volume and balance, and switch to mono.

As always with such devices that employ a small fascia-mounted screen, navigating your music collection is a bit clunky, nevertheless it will display colour thumbnails of album artwork. You can set the display to time out from 10s up to 1hr.

EUPHONIC NATURE
Installing the supplied driver was a breeze, our Mac mini running Windows 7 and JRiver Media Center v.17 successfully pushing a digital music collection into the Reference DAC within minutes.

It was immediately obvious that the sound was deliciously open and highly controlled, the DAC/preamp creating a seductively wide and deep soundstage. While the 'character' of the sound

was neither recognisably valve nor solid-state, there was a delightfully euphonic nature to its presentation, the musicians depicted in a natural-feeling acoustic space.

Where many squeaky-clean-sounding audio components can be guilty of putting an obvious searchlight on detail, no such criticism can be laid on the Reference DAC. Combined with

its spaciousness is a lyrical, free-flowing nature. The sound remains easy on the ear while permitting forensic inspection of details buried in recordings. In Propaganda's *A Secret Wish* [ZTT CID 126] the edgy harshness of 'Dr Mabuse' was handled with aplomb by this DAC, making the sibilant 'spit' palatable while allowing sound effects, such as the Lene Lovich-esque bird noises, to float high above the mix.

Using a USB-to-S/PDIF converter between computer and the Reference DAC we played a selection of hi-res tracks with complete success. There wasn't much in it, but going directly into the ARC's asynchronous USB input was slightly better. Dick Hyman's solo piano performance of 'Tain't So' from one of Reference Recording's 24-bit/176.4kHz 'HRx' releases, *Thinking About Bix*, was marginally better focused and explicit without the D-to-D converter in the replay chain. The attack and decay of the piano was more sharply defined, while the recording space appeared better resolved. Either way, the sound was deliciously vibrant.

An impression we'd gained of the Reference DAC, its apparent airiness and 'fresh' tonal palette, was reinforced when run directly into a VS115 power amp. This is how the Reference DAC should really be used: the all-ARC combo delivered grip and fluidity without a trace of artificial snap or hardness.

VERDICT

A fabulous digital preamp with an 'analogue sound'. Recordings pushed into the DAC's USB and S/PDIF inputs will sound enchanting, providing an open listening window for the high-end audiophile. ☺

ABOVE: Available in both black and silver, the familiar ARC styling includes rotary volume and source selector knobs. Buttons enable navigation of setup menu and file selection. At the rear balanced XLR and RCA phono analogue outputs are joined by USB, three S/PDIF and one AES/EBU digital inputs plus wired/wireless Ethernet hubs

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.15Vrms at 295-520ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB / network)	103.2dB / 105.9dB / 104.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0075% / 0.0005%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0050% / 0.010%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	0dB to -0.27dB/-1.1dB/-3.1dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB / network)	530psec / 40psec / 4860psec
Res. @ -100dB (S/PDIF / USB / network)	±0.1dB / -25dB / ±0.5dB
Power consumption	120W (4W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	480x178x394mm

'The musicians were presented in a natural-feeling acoustic space'

are provided on a CD-ROM.) A type A USB fascia input socket allows hook-up of flash drive memory sticks, while a second type A socket on the rear panel provides connection for an iDevice.

Thanks to the dual clock, it offers the option of native rate upsampling together with soft or sharp digital filter selection – both operable from the remote



Digital media player/DAC with onboard storage
 Made by: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH, Berlin
 Supplied by: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH
 Telephone: +49 30 787 968 0
 Web: www.burmester.de/en
 Price: £26,800

AUDIO
FILE



Burmester 111 'Musiccenter'

The 111 is Burmester's take on what a 21st century music centre might comprise, albeit with an eye-watering price tag. It is a high-end analogue preamplifier with a built-in DAC and a slot-in CD drive for playing CDs; it can rip CDs to its HDD, and since it has both Wi-Fi and Ethernet network connectivity it has internet radio functionality built in.

Once music is stored as a 'digital library' on its internal 3TB HDD, the 111 can further function as a music server to distribute music around a networked home. It's driven via an iPad that is included in the price

apparently based on that used in Burmester's flagship 069 CD player, while the balanced preamplifier employs circuitry derived from its 077 model. XLR-to-RCA adapters are provided for connecting single-ended sources to the 111's analogue inputs. Although designed to be connected directly to power amplification, it can be hooked up to an integrated amp, via various 'audio profile' menu presets.



THE 111 CAN THRILL

Using the Musiccenter first as a CD player, we experienced a smooth, creamy and luscious sound quality that's typical of the marque. However, Burmester considers this functionality to be an 'add-on', the main purpose of the CD loading slot being for ripping discs. So how

'From HDD the sound was faster and tighter with more air and zing'

(Burmester's iPad app is attractive and works well).

The lavish build quality is right up there with the best of high-end marques; it's the size of a big amplifier and weighs 28kg. A 7in colour LCD screen (800x480 pixels) dominates the fascia. Below this is the CD slot – the 111 employing a slim profile CD-ROM drive sourced from TEAC. Its DAC section is

do CD rips sound? The answer – fabulous! The 111 has a sweet and subjectively warm midband, coupled with an exceptionally smooth treble, and it delivers a deep, laid-back soundstage perspective that's redolent of the finest tube gear.

It's also quite flattering, and forgiving of raucous pop/rock recordings that often grate.

ABOVE: Left rotary knob scrolls through inputs; volume control on the right is pushed in to mute output. Context-sensitive buttons are for menu navigation. Rear outputs are balanced and single-ended, with headphone and tape (fixed). Three balanced analogue inputs are joined by six S/PDIF digital inputs and two digital outputs

We ripped Tori Amos's jangling 'Cornflake Girl' 1994 CD single: a track we often use to test a system's ability to handle hot, splashy pop fare. Played out from the 111's HDD storage it sounded bold and vivid, the tambourines and cymbals displaying little hint of coarseness or unpleasant grain. The piano – and Tori Amos's voice – sounded rich and full-bodied.

The Burmester has the ability to thrill in spades. We listened to a track ripped from *Other Worlds In A Small Room* [Medium Productions] entitled 'A Disturbed Sense Of Distance'. Dark, brooding and atmospheric, this has immense bass energy which the Musiccenter's HDD made more than merely visceral: it had texture, depth and fabulous detail resolution.

Is there a difference in sound between the 111's CD playback quality and rips of the compact disc played off the HDD? You bet! With the familiar classic, *Jazz At The Pawnshop* and playing the CD, the Musiccenter was guilty of sounding a little too warm and syrupy, its polite balance robbing some sparkle and vibrancy from cymbals. From its HDD the sound was faster and tighter, with improved bass clarity, a little more air, more 'zing'.

VERDICT

The 111 can be considered a work that's bound to evolve, upgraded via software updates. We said of Burmester's flagship CD player that you don't have to spend in excess of £30k in order to enjoy CDs, and the same goes for experiencing high fidelity from computer-based audio. But if the price is not a barrier, then the 111 Musiccenter delivers a truly fabulous sound. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.36Vrms at 223ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (48kFs/24-bit)	110.4dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00027% / 0.00038%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0012% / 0.0025%
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	-0.48dB/-7.2dB/<-30dB
Digital jitter (48kF/96kFs, 24-bit)	9psec / 8psec
Resolution @ -100dB (48kFs/24-bit)	±0.3dB
Power consumption	80W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	455x215x405mm

AUDIO FILE

Network-enabled outboard DAC
Made by: Chord Electronics Ltd, Kent
Supplied by: Chord Electronics Ltd
Telephone: 01622 721444
Web: www.chordelectronics.co.uk
Price: £7500



Chord DSX1000

This is Chord's first network player. What it has done, in effect, is to marry its top-of-the-range QBD76 HDSD DAC with StreamUnlimited's Stream700 audio streaming client – an off-the-shelf hardware solution for network audio which includes a 3.5in, 320x240 pixel colour display, supports up to 24-bit/192kHz FLAC or WAV files via wired Ethernet (24-bit/96kHz via a wireless connection), provides for internet radio and offers remote control via a smartphone app.

There are just two rear inputs – a BNC socket for S/PDIF connection and, of course, the Ethernet socket – and just two pairs of phono and XLR outputs: one at fixed level and one a variable output, adjusted by

'The more we listened to the streamed version the more we appreciated it'

an analogue volume control within the DSX1000, which allows for direct connection to a power amp.

There are no front controls other than what looks like a jog wheel but is actually a four-points-of-the-compass push-switch for navigating the menu that appears on the screen. On the other side of the screen is a deeply recessed sensor for remote operation.

Network players are intended, of course, for use remote from the

device on which the music files are stored – that's their *raison d'être*. But our listening room normally has no network running there, so we set up the simplest one possible: a Mac mini, running Windows XP and Twonky Media, acting as the music server, and a Netgear RP614 router providing the Ethernet connection between it and the player. Using this set-up, getting the DSX1000 to stream music was a doddle.

AN OPEN, LUCID SOUND

With any streamer that offers a local digital input, the first thing we want to try is a comparison between the same files played via that and via Ethernet. Our experience is that the two never sound the same and, after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, that's what we eventually concluded. Via the S/PDIF input the sound was a little leaner, sparser and, on some material, arguably more engaging.

Via Ethernet it was a bit warmer, the perspective a little closer, and the music delivered with a sense of greater weight and control.

Initial listening confirmed that the DAC stage of the DSX1000 is right up there with the best: open and lucid sounding and capable of projecting wide, deep and stable images. We began with 'Riders On The Storm' from the remastered *The Best Of The Doors* [Elektra]. The DSX1000 did nothing to disguise

the rather left-middle-right nature of the stereo but it certainly helped burnish this piece of rock history, making it unexpectedly pleasing.

A piece we used for the S/PDIF versus streaming comparison was the 24/96 download of 'Snowflake' from Kate Bush's *50 Words For Snow*. This was a track where we appreciated the leaner, slightly better separated sound via S/PDIF, but the more we listened to the streamed version the more we appreciated its merits – particularly its ability to blend all the elements into an eloquent, immersive, infectious whole.

The DSX1000 was also able to cut it with items that can all too easily sound lacklustre – for example, Fred Simon's 'Poetspeak', a laid-back number for jazz trio [Naim Label, 24/96]. There's nothing 'in your face' about this recording: it is naturally distanced, with piano in the middle of the soundstage, double-bass to the left and drums to the right. But the playback system has to have a high level of transparency, when it becomes apparent that the cymbals are particularly cleanly captured and the double-bass is unusually natural in sound quality too. Suffice to say that the DSX1000 playing this encouraged settling back for an long evening listening session!

VERDICT

If the network option is for you because you want to be able to listen some way from where your audio files are stored, the DSX1000 will deliver some of the very best sound quality available from a remote hard drive or NAS. As a first step into the audiophile streamer market, it's most impressive. ☺

ABOVE: Navigation of the menu in the colour display is either via the four-button control to its right or via the small, metal-bodied remote control, whose sensor is to the display's left

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (balanced)	5.88Vrms at 63-68ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / network)	118.1dB / 118.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00077% / 0.00006%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.02% / 0.0028%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	0dB to -0.04dB/-0.12dB/-0.2dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / network)	9psec / 5psec
Res. @ -100dB (S/PDIF / network)	±0.05dB / ±0.05dB
Power consumption	13W
Dimensions (WHD)	420x88x355mm

Bowers & Wilkins



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AUDIO
FILE

SACD transport, upsampler/network player, DAC and clock
 Made by: Data Conversion Systems Ltd, Cambs
 Supplied by: dCS Ltd
 Telephone: 01954 233950
 Web: www.dcsLtd.co.uk
 Price: Trans, £24.5k; Upsampler, £12.5k; DAC, £20k; Clock, £9.7k



dCS Vivaldi Digital System

Flagship front-ends don't come bigger than the multi-box dCS Vivaldi, comprising an upsampling CD/SACD digital Transport, an outboard DAC, outboard Upsampler and dual-mode Clock. Its new industrial design is realised in spectacular, sweeping curves and matching, full-colour TFT displays (albeit run in greyscale).

Each box has a limited range of soft-touch buttons to navigate through the various configuration menus. There's a heavy alloy IR remote but most users will gravitate towards the dCS app available on the iPod/iPhone/iPad, Android, Mac OS X and Windows PC platforms.

The app allows you to view and select music sources, including USB stick, iPhone, NAS and UPnP renderers. You can also browse and select music by location, artist or album. All relevant track metadata is provided for the selection in play (or queued) while global controls deal with play, pause, fast forward/reverse, DAC volume, DAC phase and upsampling rate.

You're not obliged to drop £67k on the entire system: you could begin with the CD/SACD Transport and DAC. Or if you've ripped your disc collection, are acquiring hi-res music downloads

But the real heart of the system is the Vivaldi DAC. Now boasting the very latest dual-mono Ring DAC, integrated volume control and selectable 2V/6V output, it will drive any power amp directly.

The Upsampler is arguably the most accommodating source component in the Vivaldi stack, accepting digital audio data from any legacy source. It offers the same upsampling options as the DAC and yet routing the CD/SACD transport via the Upsampler to the DAC still results in an improvement in sound quality.



SUBLIME SACD

This is the most exquisite digital front-end we've auditioned. With the Vivaldi DAC also performing preamp duties via a balanced connection to a Krell S-1500 power amp and B&W 802 loudspeakers, Eric Bibb's *Blues, Ballads And Work Songs* [Opus 3] sounded truly sublime. Bibb's picking of that Martin seven-string truly lifted the pace of the classic 'Cocaine Blues', both guitar and voice delivered with a realistic but agreeable intensity.

Turning to the Upsampler as source with both USB and network inputs, listening to Glen

Hansard's *Rhythm And Repose* [Anti/Epitaph] was a truly moving if conflicting experience, the contrast between the mournful tenor of the vocalist and the exquisitely accurate reproduction of strings, percussion and bass once again exposing the inherently natural disposition of the Vivaldi Digital System.

And can the Vivaldi rock! Elliott Sharp's *Terraplane* [Sky Road Songs],



ABOVE: Each fascia is milled from a 16kg slab of alloy and the flowing curves, make for a bold design statement. The units can be controlled via the limited array of buttons, but dCS's iPad app is preferred

a full-on and thoroughly eclectic mix of blues and electronica pumped full of energy found the Vivaldi standing its ground, deftly navigating the foaming rapids that swirl through this album.

VERDICT

Hugely flexible, hugely capable, the Vivaldi system represents a milestone in the development of digital audio. We have never heard music delivered so richly imbued with colour from a digital source so obviously colourless in its own right. Which is exactly how it should be. ☺

'It deftly navigated the foaming rapids swirling through the album'

and want to replay via a USB drive or wired network then you'll be looking at the Upsampler/DAC combination. Whichever route you take, the addition of dCS's stabilised 44.1kHz/48kHz (word) Clock is the icing on its digital cake.

The Transport allows upsampling, taking CD data to 24-bit/352.8kHz DXD while SACD is communicated as dCS-encrypted 1-bit/2.8MHz DSD.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	2.04Vrms at 550mohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/SPDIF/USB/network)	108.9-109.1dB (balanced out)
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00002% / 0.0002%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00025% / 0.0011%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/40kHz/90kHz)	0dB to -0.02dB/-0.1dB/-13.1dB
Digital jitter (CD/SACD/SPDIF/USB/net.)	116/30/20/10/10psec
Res. @ -100dB (S/PDIF / USB / network)	±0.2dB / ±0.2dB / ±0.2dB
Power cons. (Trans/Ups/DAC/clock)	15W / 21W / 10W / 10W
Dimensions (WHD, Transport/DAC)	444x196x435/444x151x435mm



Network-enabled outboard DAC/CD player
 Made by: T+A elektroakustik GmbH & Co. KG, Germany
 Supplied by: Avoke Ltd
 Telephone: 07876 246956
 Web: www.taelektroakustik.de; www.avoke.co.uk
 Price: £7900

AUDIO
FILE



T+A MP 3000 HV

Since reviewing T+A's DAC 8 converter [*HFN* Oct '12] it has become something of a reference for us. The same DAC architecture has been transplanted into this luxuriously built multi-function media player, the first of a new line of high-end pure audio components, dubbed 'HV' for High Voltage [see also p73]. The MP 3000 HV comprises a CD player, a UPnP network client for computer-sourced music streaming via Ethernet or WLAN, an internet radio incorporating the familiar vTuner platform, and an FM radio tuner with RDS. Naturally, since it has a high-end DAC at its core, it features an asynchronous USB input for 'pushing-in' audio data from computers, and it sports no fewer

'Patricia Barber's fabulous Nightclub album sounded divine'

than six digital inputs at the rear to accommodate a plethora of digital sources as well.

Furthermore the on-board streaming client (SCL) can play music files directly from HDDs and memory sticks via two Type A USB sockets, one on the rear panel and another on its fascia. Think of it as T+A's Music Player *balanced* (albeit without iDevice connectivity) but on steroids – since it features the

company's top-line DAC and has been built without compromise.

There are five compartments, separated by aluminium dividing walls, housing the MP 3000's DAC, digital supply, analogue supply, analogue section and, behind the 4cm-thick fascia, its control circuitry and display screen. The CD transport, whose drawer is guided by two stainless steel pushrods, lies in a sealed housing and floats on a three-point suspension system.

At its core, are eight Burr-Brown 32-bit/384kHz Sigma Delta DACs used in a 'double symmetrical' quadruple arrangement, with oversampling carried out by a 56-bit DSP. The MP 3000 HV also features four digital filter options that can be selected via the FD 100 handset: a bi-directional RF controller with built-in colour LCD.

For USB Audio Class 2.0 functionality and the ability to play 24-bit/192kHz files, you'll need to install T+A's driver. Unusually, this goes for Windows PC and for Macintosh computer users.



MUSICAL INSIGHTS

It came as no great surprise that when used as a standalone USB DAC the MP 3000 HV doesn't sound identical to the DAC 8. Sure, it displays a similarly 'clean' purity that provides a transparent window through which to observe music, but where the DAC 8 appears

squeaky-clean and vibrant, the MP 3000 HV adds a little warmth and maturity. This was illustrated by the reproduction of acoustic bass, piano and voice in Patricia Barber's 'Bye Bye Blackbird' from her *Nightclub* album [Blue Note/Premonition].

The piano appeared bolder and richer-toned here, Barber's voice more intimately mic'd and the reproduction of the track's double-bass better defined. This fabulous recording, one that we use so often as a reference, sounded divine.

We didn't *always* prefer the tonal character of the MP 3000 HV over T+A's leaner-sounding DAC 8. Listening for example to a Channel Classics excerpt from a Haydn string quartet, the sound was more open and 'fresh' via the DAC 8.

With Malcolm Arnold's *A Sussex Overture* on Reference Recordings – which has extremely lifelike crashing percussion and rasping brass – the performance was taken in its stride, and was nothing short of enthralling.

We couldn't reliably discern any difference between the CD replay and the sound from the ripped disc, whether pushed into the USB input from a computer, streamed via Ethernet, or played from a memory stick, which speaks volumes about the thoroughness of the overall design. Only via its S/PDIF input did it sound less vibrant and dynamic – doubtless because we had a USB-to-S/PDIF converter and additional interconnect in the replay chain.

VERDICT

This magnificent digital front-end component exhibits considered thinking and is evidently a work of passion and dedication to excellence. It is utterly fabulous! ⤵

ABOVE: Rotary source selector and menu/media navigation controls employ needle roller bearings and feel luxurious. A large VFD features context-driven, touch-sensitive controls. Balanced and single-ended analogue outs, both fixed, are joined by S/PDIF (RCA, two on BNC and two Toslink), AES/EBU (on XLR), USB 2.0 and wired Ethernet digital connections

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (balanced)	4.61Vrms at 44-49ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB / network)	114.1dB / 114.1dB / 114.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00067% / 0.00038%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00062% / 0.014%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	0dB to -0.39dB/-0.56dB/-7.3dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB / network)	6psec / 35psec / 10psec
Res. @ -100dB (S/PDIF / USB / network)	±0.05dB / ±0.05dB / ±0.05dB
Power consumption	10W (analogue) / 10W (digital)
Dimensions (WHD)	460x170x460mm

AUDIO
FILE

CD player, USB & S/PDIF DAC/preamp and monoblocks
 Made by: International Audio Group, China
 Supplied by: IAG Ltd, Cambs
 Telephone: 01480 447700
 Web: www.quad-hifi.co.uk; www.internationalaudiogroup.com
 Prices: DMP £2500 and Mono £2500 (each)



Quad Platinum DMP/Mono(s)

Rated at 180W/8ohm, Quad's Platinum Mono power amp is for those who crave more power than offered by the Elite QSP. Concurrent with its release is the Digital Media Player: a logical progression for those enthusiasts who have long enjoyed the earlier 99 Series CDP-2.

'The DMP handled this melange of textures with complete assurance'

While there are no analogue inputs, the DMP does add a USB input and digital outputs include one each of Toslink, coaxial, BNC and AES/EBU via XLR.

Both the Monos and the DMP provide balanced connection via XLRs for the main line-level output from the preamp and input to the power amps. Other connections on the DMP include two pairs of

conventional single-ended outputs through RCA connectors, 'System Link' via Ethernet cables and two 12V trigger outputs.

As a concept, the DMP is now a fairly common component, where a CD player's DAC has been accessed and turned into a digital preamp by the addition of a level control. For those using PC feeds, special drivers are required, and Quad supplies a fat manual to walk you through this. For those with Macs, synergy is instant.

The DMP transport is constructed from die-cast aluminium and ABS plastic, with a tray supported by steel rods running through sintered bronze bearings. Quad says this construction 'reduces noise and vibration through critical damping, allowing the laser to read the disc with unerring accuracy'.

After the DAC, a fully differential signal path feeds the balanced XLR

LEFT: Mono amps have only an on/off button while the DMP groups inputs to upper left, with CD controls lower left and to right of tray. The units are clearly labelled at the rear and fitted with good-quality connectors. There is balanced XLR connection for pre-to-power, and four types of digital outputs and six digital inputs, including USB, on the DMP. The Monos facilitate bi-wiring

outputs, and the DMP allows the user to configure the XLR and RCA outputs independently for variable or fixed level operation.

FINESSE AND VALUE

The DMP proved more than a competent CD-player-with-accessible DAC, while the Monos made us think of 909s on steroids.

2011's *Listen To Me* [Wrasse WRASS295], has a number of tracks with sonics of the to-die-for variety. Stevie Nicks' scarily rocking 'Not Fade Away' places her distinctive, slightly nasal voice in front of lean percussion and an array of backing vocals. When joined by subtle electric guitar, the sound coalesced into a liquid whole despite the contrasting textures – the Quad amplifiers providing all the requisite dynamic swings.

Linda Ronstadt's 'That'll Be The Day' emerges half-way through the album and, damn if it doesn't still sparkle, with astonishing transient elements and rich lower octaves. Again, the DMP handled its melange of textures with equal assurance. All of this is arrayed across a wide stage allowing the most curious of listeners to zoom in with Zeiss-ian focus on specific musical details. Natalie Merchant's 'Learning The Game', just strings and piano, showed the system's sheer finesse.

VERDICT

By virtue of the Monos' ease with our Wilson Sophias, the lack of drama with the DMP's faultless segue from CD to iTunes to iPlayer, and with prices nowhere near the high-end norm, the Platinum pairing is a marvel. As a coherent system, it's manna for those who still love British hi-fi's most revered name. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	200W / 340W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	250W / 470W / 820W / 1.34kW
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.087–0.16ohm (115ohm, DMP)
Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz, DMP/Mono)	+0.0 to –0.58dB/+0.0 to –0.15dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (DMP/Mono)	110.3dB (0dBfs) / 86.9dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, DMP/Mono)	0.0003–0.0008% / 0.0006–0.015%
Digital jitter (CD/48kHz/96kHz)	115psec / 160psec / 190psec
Power consumption (DMP/Mono)	10W/280W (25W idle)
Dimensions (WHD DMP/Mono)	380x100x315mm/380x135x410mm

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EDITOR'S
CHOICE



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EDITOR'S
CHOICE



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- Class D output stage
- Built in 24bit/192kHz D/A converter with upsampling
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GATO AUDIO DIA-400 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £3790

- 2x 400W@8ohm / 2x 800W@4ohm
- Class D output stage
- Built in 24bit/192kHz D/A converter with upsampling
- Coax, optical and asynchronous USB digital input up to 24bit/192kHz





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 Supplied by: PMC Ltd, Luton
 Telephone: 0870 4441044
 Web: www.bryston.co.uk; www.pmc-speakers.com
 Price: £4900

AUDIO
FILE



Bryston B135 SST²

If proof were needed of Bryston's mettle for embracing the modern world beyond purist two-channel analogue pursuits, it's the B135 SST² C-Series Integrated Amplifier. While the unit reviewed here is two-channel, purist and analogue, it can be fitted with a DAC module for £1575 that adds two coaxial and two Toslink inputs.

Other options include a £500 universal remote and an MM-only phono stage for £650. Bryston offers neither MC nor USB.

Yet even without any options, the B135 is so comprehensively equipped that it will challenge you to find omissions. Minus the digital option, you still have a half-dozen line inputs at the back, a tape loop and pre-out facility. The five-way, gilded speaker terminals are among the nicest we've seen: robust and able to accept fat cables.

Because Bryston supports home integration and home cinema the unit is adaptable for all manner of automation. The unit also features a pass-through facility, an RS232 port

fascia, the company has shown further restraint by providing a dual-purpose row of buttons to access the sources, sensing when digital inputs are in use. LEDs light up to indicate the source chosen and the two balance buttons. Plus there's a 1/4in headphone socket; the headphone amp is superbly controlled, quiet and detailed. Insertion of the jack automatically mutes the speaker outputs.

Once switched in, the B135 takes a few seconds to stabilise. You then take it out of mute, thus avoiding nasty switch-on thumps.

Features mean little if the underlying engineering is lacklustre, and Bryston ensures that it is anything but. There's over 30,000µF of filter capacitance per channel, part of a power supply that contains three ultra-low-noise transformers – two for the analogue section and the third for the digital, with discrete ground paths.

SILKY SMOOTH

Listening via Wilson Sophia 3s, the immediate reaction was to succumb to a silky smoothness. We won't call it 'valve-like', and some might prefer a sharper sound, but the lack of aggression was doubly appreciated with

music comprised of forceful brass sections – like the backing for Nancy Wilson's *Son Of A Preacher Man/Hurt So Bad* [SoulMusic Records, from 1969].

The Bryston grabs the whole of the title track and balances a multitude of textures, keeping the bass tight and fast. It underscores

ABOVE: One row of dual-purpose buttons selects analogue or digital sources; LEDs indicate choice. Note the refreshingly retro rotary volume control and 1/4in headphone socket. At the rear there's a full complement of analogue inputs and home integration connections, with digital inputs pre-fitted awaiting the optional DAC module

the slickest of horn sections, like a sonic version of Fowler's Dictionary: a lesson in punctuation and usage. Best of all, Wilson's honeyed voice, notorious for its complex tapestry of tones, comes through unhindered.

Tom Jones's 'Delilah', from *True Sixties Love* [Spectrum], is almost laughable in its intensity. What a barrage of wonderful clichés! Tinkling bells, mariachi horns, Broadway-style backing vocals, country-style redneck bass... Never does the Bryston lose the plot. Admittedly, Jones was able to command the best of Decca's producers, musicians and engineers, so nothing he released once stardom was achieved was ever less than of audiophile grade, but this is just spectacular.

From the same box set is the consummately irritating 'Cinderella Rockefella' by Esther and Abi Ofarim, with as odd an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach as 'Delilah', nonetheless enjoyable for its mix of ragtime piano, banjo, tuba and other 'comical' instruments, with a vaudeville feel provided by the vocals. Again, the Bryston kept the balls in the air, excelling for the attack and the tone of both the melodic and abrasive instruments.

While we did mainly indulge in rock, the B135 invites a more considered listening session: it errs toward the genteel. Indeed, this amp is so smooth it should really be called 'The Nigel Havers'...

VERDICT

Every high-end maker offers a circa-£5k integrated. But the B135 has sonic finesse, clever ergonomics and a form that lets you buy only what you need. That may be enough to simplify your choice. ☺

'This amp is so smooth it should be called "The Nigel Havers"'

for control and software upgrades plus two 12V output triggers, one of which is programmable.

One of the first details you notice when removing the unit from its box are the nicely integrated heatsinks in the side sections, the edges well protected and unlikely to catch you unawares. Across the

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	170W / 275W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	220W / 410W / 665W / 445W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.023–0.095ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.04dB to –4.05dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/135W)	25mV / 292mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/135W)	76.8dB / 98.1dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.0012–0.003% (0.028%, left)
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	61W/497W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	433x116x353mm / 13.6kg

AUDIO
FILE

Preamp and mono power amps. Rated at 500W/8ohm
 Made by: Constellation Audio, Newbury Park, CA, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.constellationaudio.com, www.absolutesounds.com
 Prices: Virgo £19,000; Centaur (each) £26,750



Constellation Virgo/Centaur Mono

The Virgo preamplifier and Centaur monoblocks reviewed here are models from Constellation's 'economy' Performance range, yet total £72,500. As for Reference prices, we shudder to think...

While a pretty enough design, the Virgo is rather anodyne, its greyness John Major-like. A plain-Jane outboard power supply feeds it via two umbilical cables, connecting at the back where you find rows of both XLRs and phono sockets for every input and output – four sources, two sets of outputs and RS232 and USB inputs for networks and firmware upgrades.

At the front, the central panel's 432x230-pixel screen is flanked by rotaries for balance and volume, while other operations are accessed through menus activated by a row

'The palpability was almost disturbing – realism of a rare order'

of buttons under the display panel.

These include muting, power on from standby, 'home' to return to the basic screen, display intensity, input selection and the setting of input levels. The nicely-made aluminium remote control offers standby, mute, volume up/down,

source selection, balance and phase inversion. The fascia volume control we found irritating. Nothing about it is especially intuitive and even the display all but hides the minus sign next to the digits showing the level setting. As for the speed of raising and lowering the volume, we never got used to that, so reverted to the remote control whenever possible.

As for the Centaur monoblocks [not pictured], they're huge, and they like free space around them, though nothing ever grew hot to the touch. These are seriously powerful, single-ended FET amplifiers at a factory-rated 500W apiece into 8ohm, with a switch-on regimen to ensure that nothing nasty happens to your speakers.

A ROUNDED SOUND

At the back, you have a choice of single-ended or balanced operation, but you have two options for the latter: 'Balanced' for use with non-Constellation preamps and 'Direct' for use with a Virgo or one of its siblings. We tried

both, and got different results, so we're (1) at a loss to state which is 'better', but (2) overjoyed to note that in both cases, the changes were audible enough to leave no doubt as to which was better.

In one system, using Magico S5s, 'Direct' was preferred. In the

ABOVE: A 432x230-pixel screen on the Virgo preamp's fascia is flanked by rotaries for balance and volume. The preamp is fed by an outboard PSU and offers four sets of balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) ins with pairs of XLR/RCA outs. The partnering Centaur Monos have parallel 4mm speaker outlets, RCA and low/normal gain XLR ins

editor's system, with his B&W 802s, 'Balanced' proved superior.

With 'God Only Knows' on *If You Leave...* [Moscodisc] and the 'Balanced' setting, Eleanor McEvoy was in the room, with ghostly, eerie authenticity. The palpability was almost disturbing, simply because the realism was of an order rarely achieved in sound reproduction.

Another exquisite female voice followed that sparse, unplugged session, Eva Cassidy's gorgeous 'People Get Ready', from *Best Of Eva Cassidy* [Blix]. It oozed atmosphere. Most impressive was the drumming, crisp and solid, with weight and scale, behind those soaring vocals. A fragile guitar stage-left created a gossamer-light melody, perfectly complementing the cymbals' wispiess. The cohesion was remarkable for a live recording.

With all that power on tap, we just had to dig out Kodo's *Warabe* [Sony], the opener 'Yokigen' featuring relentless drumming that immediately evokes some battle scene in a Kurosawa epic. The Centaurs are no slouches when it comes to slam, but the delight was the roundness to the sound, a quality that imparted the sense that the air being moved was of a greater quantity than the woofers could ever manage. With flute hovering over the drums, the Constellations juggled delicacy and force simultaneously, favouring neither of these over the other.

VERDICT

The price is forbidding, the size off-putting, the preamp ergonomics the antithesis of 'real-time', tactile rotaries. But what you'll hear is as close to the source as it gets. A notable triumph by any standards. ⬇

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	510W / 825W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	570W / 1.06kW / 1.93W / 3.0kW
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	7.5–77ohm / 0.018–0.028ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	–0.0 to +0.1dB / –0.00 to +0.04dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	47mV (pre) / 145mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	99.7dB (pre) / 89.9dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0004–0.0007% (0.0013–0.045%)
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	33W / 170W/800W (each)
Dimensions (WHD Virgo/Centaur)	432x140x400/432x280x508mm

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AUDIO FILE

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Made by: Devialet SAS, Paris, France
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: <http://en.devialet.com>, www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £6390 (£7390 with AIR)



Devialet 170

When Devialet's D-Premier was launched [HFN Apr '10] it appeared to offer everything – tremendous power, direct digital inputs and a uniquely slim form factor. Its beautiful industrial design was matched by the elegance of its technology, a hybrid of Class A voltage amplification with precision digital Class D current dumpers.

Devialet first chose to implement HDMI as the digital interface of the future. But now we all know that USB is digital audio's all-conquering interface. A change to the D-Premier's real estate was inevitable, its inputs reshaped along with refinements to every facet of the amplifier's layout, from switchmode power supply to its DSP core. The 170 is just one of three new amplifiers all equipped with those vital, future-proof USB and RJ45 ethernet connections. It

'This liquid smoothness in action is not only rare but perhaps unique'

has Devialet's AIR Wi-Fi module as a £1000 option and is built into new alloy casings that look slimmer still. In part this is a clever illusion, the Wi-Fi antenna now moved from the top surface into two bays within a deeper, black-coated alloy baseplate, while its dark chrome is more durable than the old finish.

Once again, the rear of the case breaks away to reveal a compact

collection of inputs and outputs while the hallmark circular display is retained as your window on to the 170's world. Devialet's new RF remote control is also both lighter and slimmer but features the same three function buttons.

The new USB port is a Type B socket, so there's no facility to host USB sticks or drives. However, there's talk of the amplifier's SD card reader also being enabled to carry high-res music files. Nevertheless, all new Devialet amplifiers will now connect directly to your computer or home network, including wireless access where the AIR module is fitted.

A CHIP OFF THE BLOCK?

So is the 170 'better' than the D-Premier? The glib answer might be to suggest the 170 is simply a chip off the ADH block, with better bass control, more insight and transparency. But it's so much more.

With USB our preferred choice, and beta PC drivers working flawlessly, the 170 wove its addictive spell. Whether enjoying 'Hotel California' from The Eagles' 1994

live set *Hell Freezes Over* [Geffen], the 24-bit render of The Beatles' *Abbey Road* album or Emily Barker & The Red Clay Halo's *Dear River* [Linn], the 170 'connected' those files to the speakers with complete mastery over their content.

Like the D-Premier, the 170 grips the loudspeaker with such unerring confidence that the boxes fade from view and the music lives and

breathes in front of you. Cymbal strikes are free of splashy overhang, powerful bass rhythms are delivered with a palpable thunder and massed strings stride into the room with a vivid presence and colour.

Devialet's 170 has a luxuriant smoothness that extends from the deepest bass to the

brightest treble, to voices and brass, to solo guitar and orchestral swells, to live or studio recordings.

Listening to Charlie Haden & John Taylor's *Nightfall* at 192kHz/24-bit [Naim], we were struck by the sheer *silence* of the background. Then there was the 24-bit *Abbey Road* remaster, 'Come Together' sounding 'all of a piece', the resonant grunge of Harrison's guitar and Starr's drums laid bare with a sense of spaciousness and atmosphere that was barely creditable. Here was a liquid smoothness in action – not only rare but perhaps unique to the brand.

With the movie soundtrack from 'The Day After Tomorrow' [Varèse Sarabande] the Devialet 170 squeezed what appeared to be near-subsonic bass from our B&W 802s, but with a definition so robust you could saw it into 10ft lengths and use it for scaffolding.

VERDICT

Devialet has taken its revolutionary D-Premier amplifier, added all-important USB and network connections while refining just about every facet of the internal engineering solution. The result is a *spectacular* success. The best has just become more affordable too.

ABOVE: Sleek industrial design belies the 170's sophistication and versatility. Input, volume and comprehensive status information is revealed on its distinctive 'porthole' display. The case is about ½in smaller than the original D-Premier

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4/2ohm)	120W / 240W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	115W / 230W / 450W / 675W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.001–0.004ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz/90kHz)	–0.0 to +0.15dB / to –3.7dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB at 48kHz)	58psec / 53psec
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/0dBfs)	93.2dB (Analogue) / 97.7dB (Dig)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz; An/Dig 10W)	0.001–0.0059%/0.0005–0.017%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	51W / 286W
Dimensions (WHD)	383x40x383mm

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 NEWS
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 CHOICE



Gato Audio CDD-1/AMP-150

New to the UK market, the CDD-1 and AMP-150 are Gato's flagship products, the visual design being the work of Kristen Dinesen.

They are both so compact that you might even think that the 150W (rated) per channel integrated must

'You heard Jarrett's every piano string vibrate as the hammer struck it'

be a Class D amplifier. In fact, it uses a single-MOSFET output stage (actually, a pair for each channel).

The CDD-1 uses a Philips CD-Pro 2 mechanism and balanced dual-differential Burr-Brown D/A converters. Gato's website headlines the dashingly styled CDD-1 as a 'High-end DAC with a drive', although the manual still calls it a 'CD player/DAC', and its

USB input accepts sample rates up to 192kHz. When loading a disc, the top cover self-aligns when replaced.

The CDD-1's big meter dial is a kind of wacky rev counter. As well as finding uses for the analogue pointer, Gato has crammed in all the other necessary display indications, including an LED digital readout, source icons for standard and USB digital inputs and the usual arrows for the CD transport.

Once a CD starts, the CDD-1's pointer needle will move steadily to indicate progress through the track or disc. Track nos are indicated by the numeric display at the top of the dial.

When running as a DAC, the analogue meter has a different function, with scale markers for all the standard sample rates from 32kHz up to 192kHz, while the digital display shows the bit-depth.

ABOVE: Focal point for both of Gato's matching fascias is a large analogue meter. Both share the same stylishly slatted curved side-cheeks, those on the amplifier also providing ventilation

The AMP-150's input selector will cycle through one balanced line input and four unbalanced line-level inputs (CD, LP, Radio and Tape). Instead of 'standby', the front-panel button activates a pre-heating feature, which gets the amp to its optimum working temperature in 10-15 minutes. There is also an active low-noise cooling system; however, we never became aware of its operation.

WORKING IN HARMONY

The CDD-1 itself was cleanly articulate, crisp and never edgy while the Gato amplifier could give singers and instruments a presence that was sometimes stunningly life-like. With them connected as a system, we felt that in terms of timbral naturalness and stereo imaging, the two products worked together in a way that really did make the whole seem greater than the sum of the parts.

On Dylan's *Blood On The Tracks* [Columbia], the stereo stage became a vast panorama seeming to stretch well beyond the speakers. But it wasn't just about wide-open spaces. On *Jasmine* [ECM] the combination put you up close to Keith Jarrett's piano, hearing every string vibrate as the hammer struck; similarly, you felt the big, chesty resonance of Charlie Haden's bass.

VERDICT

Although the attention-grabbing design is a big part of the Gato package, these luxurious products do offer a harmonious listening experience too, especially when used together. The user interface may not suit everyone but the sound quality is excellent and as such is highly commended. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	170W / 280W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	210W / 400W / 740W / 550W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, DAC/Amp)	97ohm / 0.010-0.028ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz, DAC/Amp)	+0.0 to -0.01dB / -0.40 to -0.04dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (DAC/Amp)	114.6dB (0dBFS) / 83.5dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, DAC/Amp)	0.0020-0.009% / 0.0065-0.35%
Digital jitter (CD/USB/ S/PDIF)	118psec / 15psec / 10psec
Power consumption (DAC/Amp)	29W/455W (54W idle)
Dimensions (WHD, DAC/Amp)	325x110x375mm/325x110x430mm



Integrated amplifier. Rated at 275W/8ohm
 Made by: Krell Industries Corp, Connecticut, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.krellonline.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £4998

AUDIO FILE



Krell S-550i

The Editor's review briefing included the warnings: 'It's 29kg – you may need help in unpacking it' and 'The S-550i is a remarkably *dense* amplifier, probably the most self-effacing yet monstrously powerful integrated we've ever tested.'

This new flagship integrated, replaces the FBI while the S-300i remains as Krell's entry-level integrated at £2795. The S-550i is a true 'big brother': the sonic resemblance is uncanny save for a brutal power delivery.

While the front panel suggests minimalism, that's only because all minor settings are relegated to a menu system, *eg*, balance setting and input trim, which can also be accessed by the full-function remote. The S-550i's fascia offers source select, volume, mute, power on/off (from standby) and a menu display. Inside is circuitry that

'This was a solid-state amp free of the brittle, of the glassy, of the jarring'

recalls the S-300i and a preamplifier section that can be used on its own via a pair of phonos at the back.

The design reflects long-standing Krell practice, with the company's proprietary Current Mode technology, discrete direct-coupled circuitry in a balanced topology, and individual power supply regulation. Much of the weight is attributable to a massive 1750W toroidal

transformer that shifts the weight of the amp toward the front.

Other circuit details include: no negative feedback; a balanced resistor ladder gain control; one set of balanced XLR inputs along with four single-ended phonos; plus a dedicated iPod/iPhone dock (supplied by Krell).

Aside from a worrying switch-on thump, the S-550i is easy to set up. We used it with an iPod Classic, the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 in balanced mode and Wilson Audio Sophia 3s.

NOTHING TAXES IT

This amp can swing from soft to loud with the graceful progress of a Bugatti Veyron's W16 climbing to its kilo-ponies. We began with Eleanor McEvoy's 'God Only Knows' from *If You Leave...* [Moscodisc], needing to learn if the Krell could handle *delicacy* as well as it would, without question, cope with headbanging abuse. No brutality, no coarseness, no lack of finesse: the S-550i placed Ms McEvoy in the room, her piano tinkling and resonating with the realism we'd take for

granted from the Audio Research REF75, in all its tube-y glory. This was a solid-state amp free of the brittle, of the glassy, of the jarring.

Much as we wanted to stick to that disc, we couldn't resist the edgy, scorching axemanship of Johnny 'Guitar' Watson's 'I Need It', two-and-a-half-minutes in, and preceded by punchy horns and a percussion opening that surely must

ABOVE: A perfect front panel for those who hate clutter, the S-550i's contains just buttons for sources and mute, on/off from standby, volume and a menu to access lesser commands

have been sampled by seven-figures' worth of copyists. The stand-out from 1976's *Ain't That A Bitch* [Sequel NEM CD 774], it features staccato playing so evocative of that era, all *Superfly* and wide lapels and huge shades.

Punch, attack, crisp edges, no decay – the Krell managed every sweep of brush on cymbals, the fast plucking with a hyper-metallic edge. And yet the next track, 'I Want To Ta-Ta You Baby', was pure, liquid blues – still with the cutting snap of the strings, but slithery, salacious, smoky. A perfect horn section, mixing long, airy sighs with decisive punctuation, the Krell arrayed it behind Watson, creating a backdrop with the curve of Venus's shell, but wider and taller. It was a perfect, seamless, wall of sound.

One of the most intensely tortured songs we've ever savoured from the country milieu is Conway Twitty's sublime 'It's Only Make Believe': we were delighted to find it on Glenn Campbell's *Collection* [EMI Gold]. It builds to an intensity that is almost disturbing, a mass of instruments and grandiose voices. Campbell soars, the key changes lifting him up, up, up to a point where you think his voice just has to crack. It doesn't. Neither does the Krell S500i. The form, the scale, the sheer power were *so-so* capably, competently resolved...

VERDICT

There have been massive integrated amplifiers in the past but without hesitation we nominate the S-550i as a perfect choice for those who want unbridled power yet will not (or cannot) house two components. It is a beast of an amp: one that might drive even the old Scintillas.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	335W / 600W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	390W / 750W / 1.37kW / 2.4kW
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.070–0.083ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.05dB to –2.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/275W)	71mV / 1200mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/275W)	73.4dB / 97.8dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.055–0.016%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	81W/978W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	438x148x450mm

**AUDIO
FILE**

Integrated triode tube amplifier. Rated at 50W/8ohm
Made by: KR Audio Electronics sro, Prague
Supplied by: Audio Emotion Ltd, Scotland
Telephone: 01333 425999
Web: www.kraudio.com; www.audioemotion.co.uk
Price: £16,190



Kronzilla SXI

Yes, those valves – made in-house – really are a foot tall! And they radiate substantial heat once the SXI has been powered up for a few minutes, but KR Audio's amplifiers are beautifully engineered.

The company is based in Prague, founded by electronics engineer the late Dr Ricardo Kron in 1992. It's a boutique firm of only a dozen or so people – skilled artisans who blow the glass and hand-craft the tubes.

Such is the transparency of KR Audio's Kronzilla amplifiers that at least of couple of German recording studios use them in mastering suites. The SXI integrated model here is a single-ended pure Class A design, with four line inputs; one of these is balanced (XLR). It's a hybrid amplifier, with a solid-state front end employing FETs to drive the '1610 valves, the latter offering a low input impedance due the cumulative effects of their parallel triode elements.

Aside from the chromed volume rotary placed centre front of the Kronzilla's chassis, with a small red LED built into it so you can see the approximate volume position from a distance – a nice touch since it helps avoid giving your loudspeakers any unwelcome surprises – a row of buttons switch the inputs via relays. The volume control is a

antiquated about the amp's capabilities. It sounds vivid and dynamically light-footed, with a powerful and tightly-controlled bass that allows you to analyse low-end detail with forensic precision, together with an open midband and sparkling highs which emanate from a black background.

The renowned recording of the Oscar Peterson Trio's *We Get Requests* [JVC/FIM] sounded tremendous. The snare shuffles and hi-hat were described exquisitely by the Kronzilla while the bass was woody and satisfyingly full-bodied, the amp painting a wonderful sonic picture of the musicians' performance and the acoustic space they occupied.

In a different vein, the title track from Steely Dan's *Royal Scam* album sounded similarly fresh and 'open' – we were playing a rip of a 2008 Japanese SHM-CD [Universal]. The track's elements – the piano and percussion patterns, the charmingly cheesy electric organ motifs, parping muted

brass embellishments and the song's female backing singers – were all pulled out from the recording's rather murky production. The electric guitar positioned stage

right, the sublime key to the piece, occupied its own space behind the plane of the speakers in what was a spacious sound image.

Playing 'Revised Music For Low Budget Orchestra' by the Omnibus Wind Ensemble, from the Danish ensemble's *Music By Frank Zappa* album [Opus 3], revealed the Kronzilla's ability to recreate the sounds of instruments devoid of colourful adornment. We were simply entranced.



ABOVE: Whopping dual-triode tubes are hand-crafted featuring polished brass bases and tinted glass. Chromed buttons switch inputs via relays. Volume control is motorised

The only listeners we can imagine not liking its precision and lucidity are lovers of 'softer' SET valve amplifiers enchanted by the romance of a euphonic, rose-tinted rendition of musical events. Hearing this Kronzilla playing BB King's 'Keep It Coming' from *Deuces Wild* [MCA] showcased its impressive low-end 'grip' and vivid HF, the pumping bass and snappy percussion delivered with great exactitude. One should never judge a book by its cover!

VERDICT

If you don't mind the cost of running a Class A SET amplifier and the heat it generates, you're bound to be enthralled by the Kronzilla SXI's fabulous high-end music-making ability. ☺

'The sounds of musical instruments were devoid of colourful adornment'

motorised potentiometer, the amp being supplied with a nicely formed aluminium handset featuring volume up/down, input up/down and power on/off keys.

FORENSIC PRECISION

Fire the Kronzilla up and a front panel LED glows red for approximately five seconds before changing to green, signalling the amp is ready to go. It may look old-fashioned, but there's nothing

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<3% THD, 8/4ohm)	45W / 45W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	50W / 50W / 22W / 10W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.070–0.083ohm
Freq. response (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	+0.75dB to –2.2dB/–25.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/50W)	131mV / 1000mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/50W)	87.1dB / 104.1dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.67–2.1%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	475W/460W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	385x415x550mm / 50kg

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 Supplied by: Jordan Acoustics Ltd
 Telephone: 01592 744779
 Web: www.mcintoshlabs.com; www.jordanacoustics.co.uk
 Price: £5500



McIntosh MC275 MkVI

McIntosh's original MC275 featured as an 'Audio Milestone' [HFN Dec '10], but what's reviewed here is the current production version of this most famous power amplifier. It's the same as the 2011 Anniversary Edition but with stainless steel rather than a gold chassis.

Its most spectacular outward feature, described in staid McIntosh tech-speak as 'small

'Subtle use of the pedal created chords that hung crystalline in the air'

tube illumination for amplifier status operation', comprises LEDs indicating status or output tube failure. This is a part of a protection circuit system which will also shut the amp down if speaker wires are shorted or there is a gross impedance mismatch.

The four large KT88 pentodes are joined by three 12AX7A tubes as the input and phase-splitter with a further four 12AT7s in the voltage

amp and driver stage. The 'unity-coupled autoformers' are core to the performance of the revised amplifier, which also features a jumper strap to parallel the two channels for mono operation.

Inside, there have been 'many subtle changes in circuits, and component values', while McIntosh also says that its much-vaunted output transformer-winding techniques have been further improved to give greater bandwidth. This in turn has allowed the negative feedback to be taken directly from the speaker winding, giving a higher damping factor and a claimed improvement in deep bass definition.



DEPTH AND CLARITY

We started listening with Myriam Alter's captivating 2007 album *Where Is There* [Enja]. The music just flowed, there was nothing exaggerated and at the same time it seemed that there was nothing lost. Pianist Salvatore Bonafede's subtle use of the pedal created crystalline chords that hung in the

ABOVE: Those substantial speaker binding posts came in 2007 with the MkV. LEDs in the tube bases indicate status (or output tube failure). McIntosh offers both single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) inputs with mono or stereo operating modes

air, and all the lead instruments, but particularly the cello, had a tangible presence, while drummer Joey Baron's cymbals rang true.

Moving on to Kings Of Leon and *Come Around Sundown* [Sony], we could wallow in the huge-sounding effects, with the feeling that the system was giving you it all without adding the slightest trace of grunge of its own. It sounded equally right on the clean, ringing guitar sounds that open 'Pyro', on the extreme overdrive ones on 'Mary' and on the echoing twanginess of 'The Face'.

As a test of truth at the bottom end, it would be hard to beat Esperanza Spalding's *Chamber Music Society* [Heads Up]. Spalding's acoustic bass sounded real and woody on 'Inutil Paisagem', where it's the only instrument heard while she vocalises in duet with Gretchen Parlato. Elsewhere, the line-up of jazzy chamber strings was resinous and compelling.

With the difficult RCA recording of Heifetz in the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto the sound was more than listenable: it was absorbing, conveying the greatness of Heifetz, and every subtlety of his touch. Behind him the orchestra, all too often confused and overbearing, had depth and clarity. The sound still had the signature of its period, but the hall acoustic was palpable, not just a muddying influence.

VERDICT

It does seem that the MkVI, steel or gold, is more refined and less 'tubey' than earlier iterations. Its stress-free presentation, liquid purity in the mid and intricate, believable stereo imaging make for absorbing listening. It's audibly a thoroughbred. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

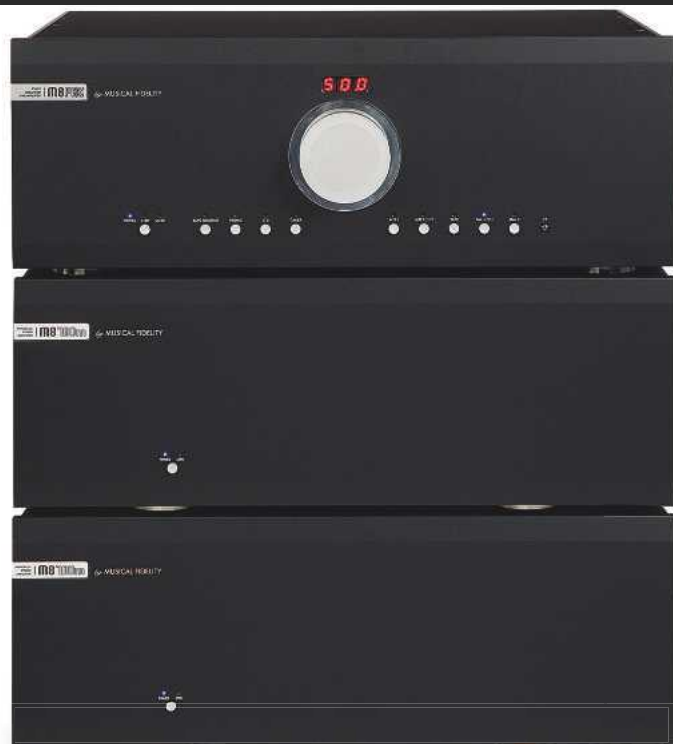
Power output (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	94W / 90W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	115W / 110W / 145W / 110W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.19-0.26ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.20dB to -4.3dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/75W)	369mV / 3194mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/75W)	93.5dB / 112.3dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.019-0.12%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	163W/490W
Dimensions (WHD)	419x216x305mm



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 Supplied by: Musical Fidelity Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 900 2866
 Web: www.musicalfidelity.com
 Prices: M8Pre, £3500; M8700m, £4000 each

AUDIO
FILE

Musical Fidelity M8PRE/ M8700m



Enter Musical Fidelity's latest ultra-high-power creation, described as 'a true heir to the [2008] Titan, delivering near-identical sound'. It's a monoblock design that's considerably more bank-balance friendly, rated at 700W/8ohm, although this transpired to be conservative. It is part of a new series of high-end components, also including the M8PRE preamplifier.

The sturdy casework has a finely-textured black finish and thick aluminium fascias while the M8700m's heatsinks are smoothly finished. The M8PRE is a fully balanced Class A design (although single-ended outputs are provided too). Much of its 17kg mass is due to its heavy casework and substantial twin regulated power supplies, employing a 350VA toroidal transformer and regulation circuitry for each stage of each channel. Extensive use is made of surface mount components to ensure very short signal paths.

There are seven line inputs, two balanced (XLR) and five single-ended (RCA). One of the balanced inputs

'If you crave muscle, these will fill a barn of a room with high SPLs'

and/or one of the single-ended inputs can be used as a unity gain pass-through.

A proper tape monitor loop is also provided, while the M8PRE includes a high quality built-in MM/MC phono stage. We found the moving-coil stage to be really excellent – and super-quiet.

The large volume knob controls a laser-trimmed electronic attenuator.

MF's remote handset includes a mute button (there's no mute switch on the fascia), and direct input switching.

Virtually identical in size to the M8PRE, each fully balanced M8700m monoblock comprises two power amplifiers in a bridged design to sustain high voltages. Again, a single-ended (RCA) input is provided alongside the balanced input so that the M8700m can be used with any preamp source. Two sets of identical speaker binding posts are provided for easy bi-wiring. Each monoblock weighs 30kg.

SAFETY BELTS ON

If you crave muscle you'll have little trouble filling a barn of a room with high SPLs with this pre/power combo, even if using the least sensitive loudspeakers you could imagine. With our Townshend Sir Galahad speakers we could barely turn the preamp past 'go'.

We began with Harald Kloser's score to the feature film *The Day After Tomorrow* [Varèse Sarabande], its achingly beautiful main theme containing thunderous low-end grumbles. Where the subsonic effects can blur the image and harden the sound of the

orchestral score, the MF combo's reproduction was grain-free and three-dimensional, without a hint of stridency, dryness or coloration. The sound was fast, explicit, open and sweet in equal measures.

Voices, in particular, popped out of the sonic fabric in a manner that sounded natural, unforced, and alive – razor sharp and vivid yet without a hint of edge or bite.

ABOVE: At 440x160x460mm each M8 box is huge! The M8700m is really two amplifiers configured in a balanced (bridged) mode to sustain high voltages; pre and power are ideally connected via balanced XLRs – the M8700m even has a daisy-chained XLR output

And the bottom end was immensely powerful and full-bodied, tightly controlled and explicit but never sounding over-damped or artificial.

The combo also made easy work of Rickie Lee Jones's *Girl At Her Volcano* [Warner]. The MF's detailed and refined midband and treble was tied to a punchy bottom end and stunning dynamic range. 'Under The Boardwalk' was clearly etched with an open and airy quality despite the digital recording's dry character.

VERDICT

This powerful and refined pre/power combo tracks dynamic swings in recordings with consummate ease. And given the eye-watering cost of today's ultra-high-end amplifiers these M8 components can be counted a relative 'bargain'. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4/2ohm)	925W / 1340W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	1297W / 2420W / 4100W / 5150W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.031–0.12ohm (47–62ohm, pre)
Freq resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0dB to –1.2dB/–0.1dB to –2.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/700W)	88mV / 2370mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (pre/power)	92.8dB / 95.1dB (re. 0dBV/0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	0.00009–0.0006%/0.0003–0.0023%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	121W/1.32kW (preamp, 17W)
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	440x162x400/440x160x460mm

AUDIO
FILE

Pre/power amplifiers. Rated at 2x60W/8ohm
 Made by: Audio Technology Switzerland S.A., Switzerland
 Supplied by: RT Services, Oxfordshire
 Telephone: 01235 810455
 Web: www.nagraaudio.com; www.rtsaudio.co.uk
 Price: Jazz, £8750; MSA, £6450



Nagra Jazz/MSA

Yes, they're expensive – but Nagra's electronic jewels are gloriously timeless and beautifully engineered. The new Jazz preamplifier maintains the compact form factor and familiar brushed aluminium casework synonymous with the marque – it's a Nagra through-and-through.

And Nagra says the preamp's circuitry – which employs 2x12AX7/ECC83s and 1x12AT7/ECC81 dual-triode valves – has been completely rethought to improve stability and reduce noise to the point where its engineers no longer consider a battery power supply a necessity. The Jazz is powered by a hideaway PSU that delivers DC to the main unit via a cable terminated with a Lemo connector.

'The Nagra proved tremendous at peeling away layers in the mix'

It has five line inputs labelled A-to-E, four of which are single-ended (RCA) while input 'A' uses XLRs. When the preamp is in its standard form, this XLR input is asymmetrical but optional input transformers can be fitted for true balanced operation.

A small switch on the fascia, next to the rotary input selector, toggles between Output 1 (balanced, XLRs) and Output 2 (single-ended, two sets of paralleled RCAs for easy bi-amping), while the switch next to

it changes the internal gain (unity or +12dB). Stereo/mono and mute switches are also featured.

For this review, we paired the preamplifier with Nagra's MSA power amp introduced in 2009. Rated at 60W/8ohm it employs just a pair of MOSFETs per channel in a deliberately simple, fully balanced circuit arrangement. The output devices are coupled to the amplifier's substantial top-mounted heatsink which is milled from an aluminium block. Even driven hard the unit barely gets warm.

In keeping the amplifier so compact, Nagra has employed a sophisticated switch-mode power supply featuring a hefty toroidal transformer. You can use a supplied jumper to bridge the amplifier's two channels and double its output power. A three-position switch selects between stereo, bridged mono, or 'double mono' whereby each channel is entirely separated for

bi-amping a loudspeaker.



UNCANNY IMAGING

Listening to Jacqueline du Pré and Daniel Barenboim performing the two Brahms cello sonatas [EMI] showed immediately that this combo makes for a delightful pairing, the cello's dusky woodiness being reproduced with vivid presence and spaciousness. The imaging was as good as we've ever experienced in our listening room – the sense of two

ABOVE: Unmistakably Nagra, the Jazz fascia sports the company's trademark Modulometer. Gain, balance and input selector are motor-driven. The Jazz includes five line inputs, a bypass, two RCA and one balanced XLR output. The MSA amplifier [not shown] offers a 1 or 2V input sensitivity through balanced XLRs and bridged mono operation through floating outputs

instruments 'hanging in the air', cello slightly in front of piano, was uncanny. Furthermore, the piano was reproduced with convincing percussive attack and decay, the Jazz/MSA pairing creating a rock-solid sonic picture with commendable precision.

The sound is exceptionally clear and crisp at high frequencies. The shimmer of cymbals as their reverberation tails decay to silence took our breath away as we listened to a selection of purist audiophile recordings. We were blown away by the sense of spatial realism the Nagra combo delivered, and the 'cleanliness' of the sound – especially when playing New York-based guitarist Stew Cutler's 'Lovely Mary' from his album *Insignia* [Naim label: CD or 24-bit/96kHz download]. The purity of the sound – the lifelike dynamics and naturalness of the percussion in particular – speaks volumes for the transparency and top-notch detail retrieval of Nagra's electronics.

We 'progged out' to Steve Hackett and Chris Squire's *A Life Within A Day* [Esoteric]. The production is rather dense, yet the Nagra proved tremendous at peeling through the blanket layers of the mix and creating space, Squire's fat and characteristically twangy bass riff patterns underpinning the myriad keyboard, guitar and reverberant vocal lines.

VERDICT

These components are beautifully built and lovely to use. Audiophiles looking for high-end performance in a jewel-like package should certainly hear the new Jazz preamp – preferably in combination with Nagra's MSA. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	69W / 103W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	70W / 122W / 170W / 170W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	150–97ohm / 0.075–0.13ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to –1.4dB / –0.1 to –4.9dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	520mV (pre) / 130mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	93.7dB (pre) / 91.5dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.055–0.35% / 0.045–0.70%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	17W/19W/211W
Dimensions (WHD pre/power)	310x254x76/280x230x118mm



CD transport and integrated amplifier. Rated at 75W/8ohm
 Made by: Roksan Audio Ltd, London
 Supplied by: Roksan Audio Ltd
 Telephone: 020 8900 6801
 Web: <http://oxygene.roksanaudio.com>
 Prices: £2500/£2800

AUDIO
FILE



Roksan Oxygene

These are just the first two models in Roksan's new Oxygene series. In the amplifier, the use of Class D or switching-amplifier technology provides high power and excellent performance from a physically compact package. There's very little heat dissipation, so the amplifier doesn't require big heatsinks or a lot of ventilation. The designers have chosen one of the well-known range of Hypex UcD modules, which have a high reputation for sound quality.

Roksan has developed a one-piece case, milled from solid billets of aluminium, and bolted on to a concealed flat base plate. So there is no joint line and no visible fixings, except at the back. The great key features of these designs are the

'Functions are initiated by touching the words 'LESS, IS, MORE''

touch-sensitive controls. Each unit has a conventional on/off switch, hidden underneath the front right hand-corner, and there are no visible knobs or switches. Instead, all functions are initiated by touching one of the engraved words 'LESS IS MORE' on the top surface.

Each forms a separate touch-sensing control button. At switch-on, the perforated display simply reads 'ROKSAN', but its purpose is

to indicate functions as you operate the controls.

The two units look identical except for the CD transport's loading slot – Roksan's Oxygene transport is based on a Pioneer DVD mechanism, attached rigidly to the casework, with some damping applied. On its back panel, the only signal connections are the usual coaxial (RCA phono) electrical and Toslink optical outputs.

While the amplifier has the simplest frontal aspect, it naturally has more going on around the back. There are pairs of phonos for three line inputs, and more unusually, a screw-on Bluetooth antenna. 'LESS' and 'MORE' give you volume up/down; a touch on 'IS' will change the functions of the other two sensors from volume to source-select.



AMPLE DETAIL

To listen to the Oxygene units in combination we needed a suitable DAC and

settled on the Pathos Converto. Before setting this up, we happily listened to music from a Mac via Bluetooth. This really is a great convenience feature as the Oxygene pairs with your device quickly and painlessly. Radio 3 programmes from internet radio at the usual low bit-rate sounded rather thin, but music files came over really well.

Returning to more conventional sources, we first used the Oxygene

ABOVE: Displays here are showing CD tracks and elapsed time and source/volume setting. The transport has just rear coaxial and optical digital outputs while the amplifier sports a Bluetooth wireless antenna as well as three line input phono pairs, an outboard PSU socket and wide-spaced 4mm speaker terminals

amplifier with a Rega CD player. We really appreciated the Oxygene's virtues of precision, speed and clarity. With 'Tangled Up In Blue' from *Blood On The Tracks* [Columbia], it brought the focus sharply on to Dylan and his gripping narrative, while the backing instruments were cleanly and firmly placed behind and around him.

Turning to the Oxygene transport, used with the Pathos DAC and feeding a Classé amplifier, we re-listened to Dylan. This set-up could really populate the soundstage with a wealth of instrumental detail, even if the effect could seem a bit too overwhelming.

But on the deceptively simple, spacious 'Simple Twist Of Fate' the combination excelled, projecting Dylan's vocal while retaining the feel of air around it, so that the track was a gripping listen right down to that final dismissive snort from his harmonica.

Then putting the two Oxygene components together (still with the Pathos DAC), we felt the combination really gelled as we returned yet again to Dylan and the system made foot-tapping sense of the 'Tangled Up In Blue' concoction of unrelenting acoustic guitar over the rhythm section's shuffle beat.

VERDICT

These are components that make an instant visual impact, but on acquaintance the Oxygene amplifier proved *sonically* impressive too. It has a clean, neutral, detailed and yet unforced sound, essentially vice-free. The CD transport also acquitted itself well, but it's a pity that the Oxygene CD player wasn't ready in time for our review. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	110W / 155W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	185W / 351W / 450W / 260W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.035–0.072ohm
Freq. response (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	–0.9dB to –0.3dB / –11.8dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/75W)	91mV / 810mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/75W)	79.2dB / 98.0dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.0088–0.017%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	27W/200W (3W, CD transport)
Dimensions (WHD)	310x60x310mm

AUDIO
FILE

Three-stage pre and power amp. Rated at 300W/8ohm
 Made by: Siltech, The Netherlands
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.siltechcables.com, www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £85,000



Siltech SAGA C1, V1 and P1

On seeing Siltech's pre/power combo you might think it incorporates a separate power supply. In fact, this unusual design splits the power amplifier into separate interstage (voltage gain) and current amplifier sections. The combo's C1 tube preamplifier (pictured) features a rechargeable battery power supply as does the V1 voltage stage of the two-box power amplifier. Of course, running the complete V1/P1 amplifier from a battery would be wholly impractical, so the P1 is mains powered.

The C1 line preamp is a 'minimalist' zero-feedback design that employs four selected ECC86 valves, one pair as current source and the other set as the anode follower. The C1's audio signal path

As in the preamplifier, the V1 voltage amp runs off its 24V safety type lead 'gel' battery supply, and as with the C1 has illuminated standby and 'forced charging' buttons left and right respectively.

The V1 is a 'zero feedback' design with two independent tube circuits that may be selected according to taste. The toggle switch between pentode and (lower gain) triode modes is hidden on the bottom plate of the V1, to avoid inadvertent switching from causing accidental damage to speakers. The P1 current stage amplifier is also a 'zero negative feedback' design and features an innovative 'Apollo Lightdrive' switchmode PSU that's optically decoupled from the super emitter-follower output stage.



WHICH MODE?

The SAGA was auditioned through the editor's B&W Nautilus 802 floorstanders and with balanced connections used throughout. A

variety of music, either ripped from CD or native hi-res 24-bit files at various sampling rates up to 192kHz, were played via a Cambridge Audio BD player [see p37]. The digital output of the player fed T+A's DAC 8, yet we were surprised to hear little or no difference between the Cambridge player and the standalone DAC when A/B'd in quick succession.

ABOVE: Siltech's C1 preamplifier offers six line inputs, one balanced on XLR, with parallel RCA and XLR outputs mirrored by equivalent inputs on the V1 [not shown]. The V1 accommodates bi-amped P1s with its dual XLR outs. Only the P1 amplifier has a standard IEC mains inlet – the battery-powered C1/V1 have two-pin charger sockets

The sound was notably 'clean' and free of treble grain, producing stable images between and beyond the speakers of high-end calibre whether listening to the analogue output of the Cambridge player or the output of the exceptionally fine DAC 8. This might imply that the SAGA amplifier is unusually 'source agnostic', sounding exquisite whatever component is upstream.

Further listening in our test system showed that the SAGA is not without its own character, albeit producing a tightly-focused and notably smooth and comfortable sound. Female vocals in particular benefited from the SAGA's uncommon civility and desiccated midband clarity. Anita Baker's 'Sweet Love' from *Rapture* [24-bit/192kHz download from HDtracks] had great energy and dynamic punch, the recording's artificially splashy cymbals and multi-layered keyboards now kept nicely in check.

In the test system Eleanor McEvoy's *If You Leave* [Moscodisc] recording sounded better with the SAGA operating in pentode mode. Conversely, when listening to the fabulous 24-bit/176.4kHz *Exotic Dances From The Opera* [Reference Recordings] the dynamic performance was seemingly allowed much more free rein when the SAGA was switched to triode operation.

VERDICT

Intriguing and unique in its design concept, this is the sort of product that makes audio such an utterly fascinating hobby, proving there's so much more to be discovered. The SAGA's calm, unfussy sound quality is sure to win the ears and hearts of the well-heeled music lover. ☺

'Female vocals benefited from the SAGA's civility and midband clarity'

is point-to-point wired with silver monocrystal cables (in the P1 too) and has been kept separate from the logic control circuitry that governs battery charging, input switching and volume control.

A plug-top power supply and lead connects to the rear of the C1, the back panel also housing the unit's main on/off rocker switch plus XLR and RCA analogue outputs.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	290W / 360W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	315W / 630W / 1090W / 690W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	7.5–77ohm / 0.078–0.10ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	–0.0 to +0.1dB / –0.17 to +0.12dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	740mV (pre) / 129mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	99.7dB (pre) / 97.9dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.35–0.50% / 0.11–0.52%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	50W (charging)/223W/1.56kW
Dimensions (WHD C1/V1/P1)	480x(80/120/160)x340mm



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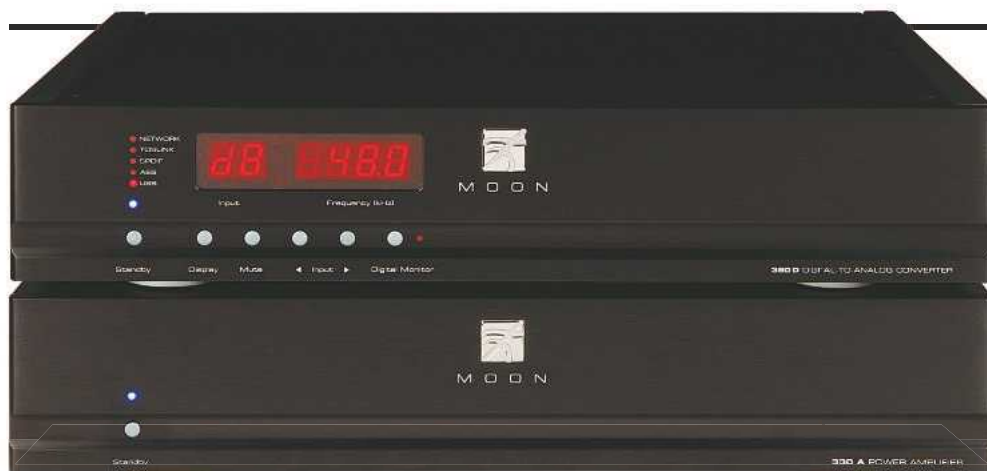
ROKSAN

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AUDIO
FILE

Streaming DAC/preamp and power amp. Rated at 125W/8ohm
 Made by: Simaudio Ltd, Canada
 Supplied by: Renaissance Audio, Scotland
 Telephone: 0131 555 3922
 Web: www.simaudio.com; www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk
 Prices: 380D, £4600; 330A, £2800



Simaudio Moon 380D & 330A

At the heart of Simaudio's 380D DAC/preamp is its M-AJC32 processing (Moon Asynchronous Jitter Control in 32-bit mode) and at the core of this is an eight-channel ES9016S Sabre DAC from ESS. Simaudio claims to have further improved jitter performance with its own 'Alpha Clocking System'.

The 380D has separate power supplies, each with a toroidal transformer and 11 stages of voltage regulation, for its digital and analogue sections. The analogue stage is a fully differential circuit and balanced XLR connections are strongly recommended, although RCAs are also provided.

'We struggled to hear any differences between "DAC direct" and MiND'

The unit has eight inputs covering the full range of interface options: two AES/EBU inputs (XLRs), S/PDIF via two optical Toslink inputs, three electrical inputs and a B-Type USB socket for pushing data in from a computer source. All inputs accept signals up to 24-bit/192kHz.

The busy rear panel sports a main power switch next to the IEC power cord inlet plus a 12V trigger output

and a socket for an IR receiver. There's also an RS-232 port.

The infra-red handset provided is a perfunctory plastic affair, with keys for controlling a Moon CD transport and others for volume up/down, mute, display on/off and standby. There are two additional options for the 380D: an extra £900 buys a remote-controlled volume circuit, obviating the need for preamp and interconnect cables and another £900 adds a MiND built-in network client, to allow music streaming from digital music libraries stored on computers, etc.

The 330A Moon stereo power amplifier, is rated at 125W/8ohm and housed in a slim enclosure. The amplifier is a 'zero global feedback' Class AB design that claims to operate in Class A up to 5W output, using four output transistors per channel. These are bipolar devices

that Simaudio has specially made.



HOLOGRAPHIC
 We found this DAC/preamp and power amp combo to be noticeably even-handed and free of coloration. Certainly there is no 'tubey' warmth or exaggerated presence to the midband: rather it sounds uncommonly balanced and neutral – and delightful to listen to.

ABOVE: The 380D's large display shows input selection and sampling frequency. The 330A (lower unit) is a balanced, symmetrical design with a huge 400VA toroid and two pairs of bipolar output transistors per channel; it has balanced inputs plus RS-232 and 12V triggers

Exploring a bunch of audiophile recordings to test the combo's mettle showed it to be immensely confident-sounding: fast and precise with deep, taut bass, a hear-through midband and sweet, fatigue-free treble. Guitarist Stew Cutler's *Insignia* album [Naim] sounded fresh and alive, the reproduction of the space around the drum kit clearly painted to create a palpable image of musicians performing beyond the confines of our monitors.

Similarly Patricia Barber's live *Companion* CD [Blue Note/Premonition] sounded spookily holographic, the essence of her band's masterful performances as they worked their way through interpretations of Sonny and Cher's 'The Beat Goes On' and Santana's 'Black Magic Woman' delivered with both grace and assurance.

We were bewitched by the Moon units' reproduction of transients that gave staccato bass lines buoyancy and punch, while the stability and focus of the image didn't waver whatever was happening dynamically. And we struggled to hear any perceptible difference in image focus or musical dynamics between the 'DAC direct' and the MiND network player.

VERDICT

Such is this combo's even-handed nature when reproducing any type of music it's difficult to criticise it – unless, that is, you crave romantic euphony and/or specifically need a more powerful amplifier. The 380D is a fabulous USB-equipped DAC, and if you want to stream music and control your system via a tablet or smartphone then the app for the MiND network player has been thoughtfully executed. ⬇

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	135W / 215W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	165W / 320W / 600W / 85W
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.009–0.083%
Distortion (380D, 20Hz-20kHz, 0dBfs)	0.00018–0.00045%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz, 380D/330A)	+0.0 to –0.07dB/+0.0 to –0.15dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (380D/330A)	109.2dB @ 0dBfs/96.2dB @ 0dBW
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB)	10psec / 10psec
Power consumption (380D/330A)	17W / 27W idle / 400W rated op
Dimensions (WHD, 380D/330A)	429x86x333mm/429x89x356mm



Pre and power amp. Rated 300W/8ohm
 Made by: Technical Audio Devices Labs Inc, Japan
 Supplied by: GX Audio Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 0845 643 6299
 Web: <http://tad-labs.com>; www.tad-labs.co.uk
 Price: C600, £27,000; M600, £26,000 each

AUDIO
FILE



TAD C600/M600

This lavishly-built C600 preamplifier and unusual looking partnering M600 monoblocks [not shown] are TAD Labs' 'Reference' amplifiers.

The C600 preamp's aluminium subchassis is 33mm thick and weighs 15kg alone, designed to resist acoustic vibration and provide a 'low and stable ground potential', says the company. Removing the preamp's top plate reveals its dual mono construction and all-discrete signal path; it's a fully balanced design. The power supply, with its massive transformer, is a separate 'hideaway' unit.

And since the D600 disc player we've tested [*HFN* May '12] sports digital inputs, the C600 is a 'pure analogue' preamp, with six line-level inputs, three balanced and three single-ended, and balanced and

increments – feeling truly luxurious in operation. A perfunctory remote handset covers essential functions.

Meanwhile, the idiosyncratically-styled M600 monoblocks are truly massive beasts each weighing 90kg; they sit squat on a graphite cast-iron monocoque chassis with spiked feet. Conservatively rated at 300W/8ohm the power amp is fully balanced and sports a solitary XLR input socket at the rear. Two sets of speaker outputs are provided. (As it's a bridged transformerless design, use with electrostatics and some Tannoy models is precluded.) Power on/off is via a rocker switch concealed under the front edge of the amplifier's chassis.

NEVER FLUSTERED

These designs deliver fabulous bass depth, detail and 'grip' combined with sprightly delicacy and finesse through the midrange and treble. Consequently things can really rock at high SPLs while remaining civilised and controlled. They

don't get flustered with densely-packed productions, and with purist audiophile recordings instruments and voices appear clearly separated by inky-black silences.

Where the M600 power amps appear 'fast' and explicit – albeit with never a hint of harshness or glare – and supremely authoritative, the C600 preamp *could* be accused

of sounding slightly reticent and laid-back. However, with TAD Labs' Compact Reference (CR1) monitors you'd garner a different opinion, the electronics virtually disappearing within the replay chain.

Stereo imaging is exceptional, with outstanding inner texturing and detail that allows forensic inspection of recordings, yet the overall balance is surprisingly smooth and relaxed. In particular, they render percussion and brass in an appropriately aggressive and unsettling manner when required.

The amplifier combo brought several 'difficult' recordings to life. Joni Mitchell's *Dog Eat Dog* album from 1985 [Geffen] has an electronic 'edge' that we've always found fatiguing, but the C600/M600 combo made easy work of it, sounding refined and civilised. The sound effects during 'Smokin' leapt out, while Mitchell's multi-layered vocal lines were delivered with uncommon clarity and fine diction.

To witness these amplifiers' supreme naturalness we played various hi-res recordings of the Norwegian Helge Lien Trio [24-bit/96kHz FLAC, highresaudio], the depiction of each recording venue's ambience, the decay of the piano, the delicacy of gently caressed cymbals and brushes sizzling across the snare drum proving exquisite in their realism.

VERDICT

These hand-crafted amplifiers are immaculately finished and fully deserving of their price tags. Striking a near-perfect balance between explicit 'studio monitoring' and home hi-fi 'musicality', they should be on any audiophile's dream wish list. ☺

ABOVE: Cosmetically matching TAD's D600 disc player / DAC, the C600's display employs static light-mode LEDs to avoid HF noise. The fully balanced M600 power amp [not shown] is embedded into a 35kg graphite cast-iron chassis and base

'Instruments and voices were clearly separated by inky-black silences'

single-ended outputs alongside two fixed-level 'record' outputs.

Other buttons on the C600's front panel offer mute and display-off while also accessing the preamp's comprehensive setup menu. Build quality is immaculate, the C600's rotary input selector and volume control – adjusting gain in either 1dB steps, or 0.5dB

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	420W / 740W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	480W / 930W / 1650W / 2690W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	320–2.3kohm / 0.035–0.05ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to –5.9dB / –0.0 to +0.2dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	248mV (pre) / 88mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	99.8dB (pre) / 100.6dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0002–0.002% / 0.0025–0.0065%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	38W/100W/560W
Dimensions (WHD pre/power)	450x150x440/516x307x622mm

**AUDIO
FILE**

Integrated amplifier. Rated at 300W/8ohm
Made by: T+A elektroakustik GmbH & Co. KG, Germany
Supplied by: Avoke Ltd
Telephone: 07876 246956
Web: www.taelektroakustik.de; www.avoke.co.uk
Price: £9900



T+A PA 3000 HV

Germany's T+A has spent the last couple of years developing a completely new range of all-solid-state electronics: its 'HV Series' [see also the MP 3000 HV player, p52].

Built into an all-aluminium case, the PA 3000 HV amplifier's individual sub-assemblies are screened in separate chambers. An upper compartment houses the preamplifier and voltage amplifier stages, while the electronic control processor and circuitry for driving the display screen – fed by a separate power supply arrangement – sits in a recess machined out of the 40mm-thick aluminium front panel. A 10mm-thick dividing wall shields the top section from the left/right current amplifier stages and

'Pair the two HV components and the results are stupendous'

the unit's massive power supply is in a lower compartment.

The PA 3000 HV's topology is based on a cascode differential amplifier and is entirely discrete, with galvanic isolation between the voltage and current amplifier stages. All stages are driven at an unusually high voltage – hence 'HV'.

Switching functions are carried out by sealed gold-contact relays integrated within the circuits to

keep wiring to a minimum and signal paths as short as possible. The electronic volume control employs discrete resistors and gold-contact relays to provide gain adjustment in 1dB increments.

At the rear there are six line inputs, numbers 1-4 being switchable between single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) operation. The two sets of rhodium-plated speaker terminals can be configured for bi-wiring or for driving a second pair of speakers – this is done via the amplifier's setup menu. All key functions can be controlled via the chunky aluminium handset supplied.

FEARFUL POWER

The company may claim the feedback-less Class A design of its amplifier achieves tonal characteristics similar to those produced by valves, but it doesn't deliver anything like what most audiophiles would describe as a traditional

'tubey' sound. The PA 3000 HV is a subjectively fast and vivid-sounding amplifier that dispenses tight, punchy and fearfully powerful bass.

The source used first was T+A's DAC 8 [HFN Oct '12]. Playing a selection of familiar test pieces swiftly revealed the T+A amplifier's incredible resolution and subjectively grippy bass control. With tracks from *The Sheffield Jazz Experience* compilation album,

ABOVE: Large VFD includes touch-sensitive controls, while rotary source selector and volume control knobs employ needle roller bearings to provide a luxurious feel

for example, such as Dave Grusin's 'Captain Bacardi' and 'Things Change' by David Benoit with horn player Jerry Hey, we thought the sound could appear as rather stark and matter-of-fact.

There was nothing in the way of 'electronic haze', while the amplifier's subjectively black background allowed the image to extend way back from the plane of the loudspeakers. Yet despite all this, the amplifier's absence of 'character' could make the music seem somewhat sterile.

However, when partnered with T+A's matching MP 3000 HV media player the PA 3000 HV amp sounded noticeably more colourful and full-bodied through the midrange. Pair the two HV components and the result is utterly stupendous: startling dynamics, holographic imaging and stunning transparency, with a fabulous ability to separate instruments and paint a three-dimensional picture of a recording venue.

In the first part of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* on Telarc (Cleveland Orch/Maazel), woodwinds and strings were beautifully separated, with palpable space in the auditorium. In particular the amplifier rendered the brass in an appropriately aggressive, startling and unsettling manner – although it avoided the white hot, over-bright glare that is an all too common trait of lesser solid-state amplifiers.

VERDICT

This amplifier powerhouse warrants consideration not least for its superlative build and sophisticated engineering. With sympathetic partnering system components it will thrill and captivate. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	350W / 600W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	410W / 780W / 1.47kW / 940W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.049–0.058ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.10dB to –1.8dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/300W)	26mV / 464mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/300W)	85.7dB / 110.5dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.024–0.030%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	155W/980W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	460x170x460mm / 38kg

A-S3000

Integrated Stereo Amplifier



CD-S3000

CD/SACD Player with Built in USB DAC



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Beautiful Design.
Sublime Sound.

The Yamaha A-S3000 and CD-S3000,
125 Years in the making.



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<http://uk.yamaha.com>

Powered by music

**AUDIO
FILE**

Mains regenerator with nine outlets
Made by: PS Audio, Boulder, Colorado
Supplied by: Signature Audio Systems
Telephone: 07738 007776
Web: www.psaudio.com; www.signatureaudiosystems.co.uk
Price: £4400



PS Audio P10 Power Plant

Since 1999 a succession of mains regenerators from Paul McGowan's company has served to cement its reputation as the audio world's preeminent supplier of what are, in effect, high-voltage power amplifiers delivering a mains waveform to our audio equipment much cleaner than we would otherwise access via the three-pin outlets dotted around our homes.

Biggest and beefiest of the AC regenerators in PS Audio's latest range is the P10. It offers nine three-pin unbalanced outlets on its rear panel, has no fan-cooling

'It was the extra control the P10 brought which caught our attention'

to add to background noise (all cooling is passive via the large inset side heatsinks), and is capable of a sustained output up to 1500VA.

A short-term capability of 1750VA means that it can feed power amplifiers as well as lower-demand components such as preamps, disc players and DACs.

Three outlets have an inrush limiter, to prevent the P10's protection circuitry cutting in when power amplifiers that draw high switch-on current are powered up.

A rear Ethernet socket allows you to establish an online interface via which firmware upgrades can be applied. PS Audio recommends the use of a heavy-gauge, screened mains lead to connect the P10 to a wall socket [see *HFN* Apr '13 review for full details of facilities, etc].

STARTLING GAINS

With the P10 set to the Sine waveform option (which we came to prefer), we began by listening on headphones: 24-bit/88.2kHz rips of Emma Kirkby singing Robert Johnson's haunting 'Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies' from *Musique*

And *Sweet Poetrie*, part of Walter Piston's darkly energetic String Quartet No 1 [both BIS] and, very different, Peder Af Ugglas's soft-rock 'Beyond' from his album of the same name [Opus 3].

Powering from the P10 made the sound darker-hued and weightier. Emma Kirkby's voice gained warmth

and the spacious church acoustic became more fully formed. In the Piston, the cello sound was fuller and the persistent rhythmic pulse of the piece became more visceral, while Ugglas's laid-back guitar melody was even more like a luxurious hot bath.

Powering a Chord QuteHD DAC from the P10 retained the warmer balance but added some welcome crispness: Emma Kirkby's voice became, appropriately, even more bell-like and in the Piston there was some extra urgency to the playing.

The P10's ministrations were even more impressive with loudspeaker listening, using Thiel CS1.6s driven via Exposure XVIII Mono power amplifiers. While the extra bottom-end weight and warmer tonal balance were still manifest, it was the extra control that P10 power brought to the Exposures' sound that really caught the attention this time.

Startling improvement was wrought with a 24-bit/96kHz HDtracks download of 'Country Dreamer' from Wings' *Band On The Run*. We have never heard the instrumental intro to this track delivered with such clear characterisation of each element or more precise control of its position within the soundstage. Neither have we previously experienced Paul McCartney's vocal – which takes on a notably harsher edge in the second verse – delivered with such assurance, such a sense of accurate transcription of the master tape.

VERDICT

This versatile, high-output mains regenerator thoroughly earns its place at the head of PS Audio's latest range. There's good reason to suppose that with most audio equipment it will have an effect ranging from positive to positively startling. Notably fine value too. ⬇

ABOVE: Apart from the on-off switch, all controls are accessed by icons on a small touch-screen to the fascia's right. The nine rear outlets are grouped into five zones that can be separately switched

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Harmonic	Mains	P10
3rd	1.07%	0.35%
5th	1.98%	0.32%
7th	0.56%	0.18%
9th	0.35%	0.10%
THD (2nd-14th)	2.36%	0.53%

BLIND-LISTENING
CABLE LOOMS **£297-£460** **GROUPTEST**

Van den Hul The Wave/ CS-122 Hybrid **£310**

From Holland comes this long-established cable specialist, with an impressive pairing

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cable loom

ORIGIN
Netherlands

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper with Hulliflex jacket
- Speaker cable: silver-plated copper and carbon hybrid speaker cable with Hulliflex jacket
- Prices: interconnect £130/1m, speaker cable £20 per metre untermated

DISTRIBUTOR
Flamingo Audio

TELEPHONE
07833 955014

WEBSITE
vandenhul.com

From a company that has made itself a great name for the fine moving coil cartridges it makes, comes a vast range of interconnects and speaker cables. The Wave is towards the more affordable end of this, and is another silver-plated, copper cable featuring a "massive" 0.9mm central conductor of oxygen-free copper. A specially foamed dielectric insulation material is said to minimise high frequency signal attenuation. The outer and inner layer are made of the same material as the central conductor, which is described as a "triple shield" that is said to aid interference suppression. As with all van den Hul cables, it is covered in the company's own 'Hulliflex' cable jacket, which is claimed to be both environmentally friendly and contain no halogens.

The CS-122 Hybrid is an updated version of one of vdH's classic speaker cables, and sports two conductors made of 147 strands of 0.16mm diameter, high-purity, matched-crystal oxygen-free copper with a very dense pure-silver coating, alongside a carbon saturated layer that is said to

improve the sound. The cable jacket is also made of Hulliflex and is described as "a very attractive matt cream colour". During the debrief one of our panelists counters: "it looks like something you see in a hospital!"

Sound quality

From the opening bars of the Beethoven piece, it is obvious that what we are dealing with here is special. For the first time in the test, the sound hangs back from the speakers and dissolves into the room, rather than appearing to come from two points in space – which is what happens to a greater or lesser extent with the other looms. Indeed, the transparency of these cables is superb, but it isn't transparency at the expense of musicality, as the vdH loom also has a wonderfully mellifluous quality to it that sees the music ebbing and flowing in a seductive and arresting manner.

The Paul Simon track is proof positive of the way these cables are able to let the singer's real intentions flood out – every vocal inflection is carried beautifully, giving a mesmeric quality to the music. Sure, all the detail is there, but the bigger picture isn't lost in the process of rendering it.

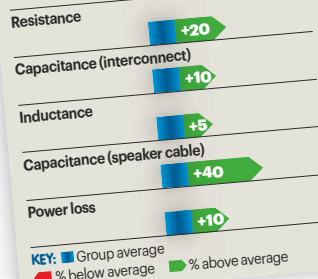
The first track is startlingly different to most of the other cable looms, in the way the decay on the voice seems to hang on, rather than 'falling off a cliff' with most of the others. The vocals are expressive and dynamic, and this is set over a backing that suddenly takes on an urgent, snappy quality to it – when previously the musicians seem to just be going through the motions. It is amazing how the same beats sound so different, as if they've been set free. Soundstage width isn't as good as some here though; this is where the

ON TEST

In common with the Atlas Asymmetric interconnect, vdH's The Wave is also a 75ohm coaxial type and so lends itself to both 'analogue' and 'digital' (S/PDIF) duties. This common geometry is reflected in the similarly low inductance and capacitance of the two interconnects although vdH's greater conductor area lends it a very slightly lower 45mohm/m loop resistance.

VdH's partnering CS-122 speaker cable, now in 'Hybrid' guise with mixed metal and carbon conductors is a very different beast from the original CS-122 that I tested for *Hi-Fi Choice* over 21 years ago. The spaced, figure-of-eight geometry means the 1.0µm/m series inductance is unchanged, but the improved dielectric means capacitance is half what it was at just 17pF/m. Resistance has also been cut by a factor of nearly 3x at 11.4mohm/m, further improving the achievable amp/speaker damping factor. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



vdH falls slightly short; it isn't constrained or shut in, just not quite as expansive as – say – the Tellurium Q. That said, depth perspective is brilliant, "The first cable I'm hearing with front-to-back dimensionality," says one panelist. Tonally it is pretty even – maybe just a touch on the dark and velvety side, but certainly not as sepia-tinged as the Tellurium Q.

The overall effect is of an absolutely stellar cable combination and one that's an essential audition for anyone that's in the market for such a thing. The great thing is that it's not really all that characterful, it's just very unobtrusive and lets the music's true flavour come flooding out.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Very musical, engaging sound; open and detailed

DISLIKE: Slightly constrained stage width

WE SAY: Superb value cable loom, one that's an essential audition

Group test verdict

Opinions have been discussed and the final verdicts are in from our listening panel, and now it's down to **David Price** to unravel the final results...

THE LEAST POPULAR cable loom is the Chord Company's. In the context of the review system it simply doesn't shine, turning in a musically uninvolved performance. It is reasonably open, but seems a touch unforgiving on harder-sounding tracks. If nothing else, this shows the importance of synergy, as the brand is a popular one with many friends.

The Atlas loom comes next; here there are some strong positives, but some negatives too – there is no mistaking its energy and verve, these cables pushing the song along with verve and brio. But it isn't the most

transparent combination here by a long chalk, sounding a little congested and lacking in subtlety.

The Ecosse is the first of the cable looms that the panel really liked, praising it for its genuine openness, gentle musicality and affable nature. Indeed, one panelist put this up in second place, so enthusiastic is he about it. It's a great, general purpose performer, which is well worth giving an audition to.

The same can be said of Black Rhodium's cable combination, which again doesn't swing one way or the other too much; it gives an enjoyable,

open and spacious sound without exactly burning down the house, so to speak. It has just a touch more smoothness than the Ecosse in our system, hence its higher ranking.

Tellurium Q's loom is generally very well liked, with a spacious sound and musical gait that gets into the rhythms and works on communicating the emotion of the song. The trade-off is that it is a little indistinct in terms of its low-level detail resolution – you'd never call it forensic – and isn't a patch on the winner, which elicits strong, unanimous praise.



The moment the van den Hul cable loom comes on, the panelists give a collective sigh of relief. Music has a lilting flow and a sense of purpose that isn't evident elsewhere. Comprehensively the best here, this cable loom comes heartily recommended.



Make/model

Atlas
Hyper Asymmetrical/
Hyper2.0

Black Rhodium
Prelude +/Sala

Chord Company
Chameleon VEE 3/
Odyssey 2

Ecosse
Nu Diva/ES.23

Tellurium Q
Blue/Blue

Van den Hul
The Wave/
CS-122 Hybrid

	Price	Sound	Value	Build	Features	Overall	
	£378	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	Snappy rhythms make for a fun listen, but it lacks finesse or transparency
	£460	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	Nice, easy, open sound with decent detail and smoothness
	£365	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	Doesn't hit the spot in the review system, with a slightly cool, opaque sound
	£340	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	Fine sounding, musical loom with good levels of detail and grip
	£297	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	Smooth, soft, downy sort of sound allied to pleasing musicality
	£310	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	Grippy, fast and exciting sound, but with excellent transparency, too

Key features

	Copper	Silver/copper	Silver	Cop/sil/carbon	Multi core
	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

TRY WITH THESE

CD PLAYER: Audiolab 8200CD £700

Still our fave rave mid-price silver disc spinner, it gives nothing away in performance terms to any rival and provides a powerful, detailed source for them to work with. Match to a smooth, insightful cable such as the vdH or Tellurium Q.



LOUDSPEAKER: Q Acoustics 2050i £500

We're recommending these ad nauseum – sorry if it's boring, but they're great budget boxes! They have a big, powerful sound, and are nicely tuneful, but can seem a little too warm for some tastes – which is why a clean and open cable loom will suit best, such as the van den Hul, Ecosse or Black Rhodium.



AMPLIFIER: Creek Evolution 50A £750

A very open and even-sounding amplifier with bags of detail and a confident overall demeanour, you'll never know you're listening to what's in relative terms a budget integrated. Still, it's not the warmest in tonal terms so again the Tellurium Q will go nicely here.



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ERIC WILEY, West Yorkshire, WF10 5BS
Tel: 0197 755 6774, www.ericwiley.co.uk

FUTURESHOP LTD, Herts., WD6 2BW
Tel: 020 8905 1555, www.futureshop.co.uk

HIFI SOUND LTD, Stockton on Tees, TS18 1BZ
Tel: 0845 601 9390, www.hifisound.co.uk

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Tel: 0148 442 4000, www.audiovation.co.uk

INSPIRE HI-FI, Derbyshire, S43 3QE
Tel: 0124 647 2222, www.inspirehifi.co.uk

JORDAN ACOUSTICS, Dorset BH23 6BB,
Tel: 01202 911886, www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

MIDLAND AUDIO EXCHANGE, Worcestershire DY9 9TD,
Tel: 01562 731100, www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk

MOTH GROUP, Bedfordshire, MK45 3HT
Tel: 01234 741152, www.britishaudio.co.uk

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Tel: 0187 227 3215, www.senso-systems.co.uk

STONE AUDIO UK LTD., Dorset BH16 6FE,
Tel: 01202 630066, www.stoneaudio.co.uk

TAVISTOCK AUDIO, Devon, PL19 0DE
Tel: 0182 261 8940, www.tavistockaudio.co.uk

THE MUSIC ROOM OF GLASGOW LTD, Glasgow, G3 6AX
Tel: 0141 333 9700, www.music-room.com

ZOUCH AUDIO LTD, Leicestershire, LE65 1BQ
Tel: 01530 414128, www.zouchaudio.co.uk

AUDIO
FILE

Circumaural closed-back dynamic headphone
 Made by: Audio-Technica, Japan
 Supplied by: Henley Designs Ltd, Oxfordshire
 Telephone: 01235 511166
 Web: www.audio-technica.com; www.henleydesigns.co.uk
 Price: £340



Audio-Technica ATH-A900X

It's hardly coincidental that four of the five manufacturers in our June '13 headphones group test – AKG, Audio-Technica, Beyerdynamic and Sennheiser – make microphones as well as headphones. Expertise in the manufacture of small transducers has often brought the two products together under one roof, at least among long-established marques.

The closed-back ATH-A900X is a large headphone, traditional in appearance but for the fact that it uses A-T's distinctive Wing Support mechanism rather than a traditional headband. It's a clever idea in that it removes headband pressure from the top of the skull and obviates the need for the usual sliding capsule adjustment. On all previous exposures to it we've found it comfortable, but with the A900X the capsules could slide down over one's ears, so that the inside of the large, plush earpads rested on the top of the pinnae: not conducive to restful long-term listening!

The A900X has a 3m cable, and it accommodates both ¼in and mini-jack connection by means of a gold-plated sleeve adapter. We were particularly pleased to see that the two overarching steel hoops that provide the moderate capsule

group test where we encountered the cheaper, open-back ATH-AD700, a model still in the Audio-Technica range. We've heard quite a few A-T headphones in the interim, not many of which we've liked as much as this, but a few bars of music were enough to tell us that the A900X shares the AD700's great strength: a sense of spaciousness uncommon in headphones (even less so in closed-back models).

Partly down to tonal balance and partly the result of an easy, natural way with dynamics, this quality gifts the A900X with an ability to make all kinds of music enjoyable to listen to. In truth it doesn't have quite enough presence band output to be entirely neutral tonally or unfailingly transparent, but it only takes a few minutes of adaptation to be captivated by its music-making and to forgive its limitations.

This spaciousness was particularly welcome in a naturally distanced Opus 3 recording: a 24/88.2 conversion of the DSD128 transcription of 'Black Beauty', a knockabout trad jazz piece from *Showcase 1* downloaded from www.dsdfile.com. It also conveyed well the large Kingsway Hall acoustic of Decca's fine old LSO recording of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, conducted by Sargent [ripped from 458 595-2]. OK, the double-bass slaps could have been more energetic in the former, and the tape hiss was notably

suppressed in the latter.

The overall impression in both cases, though, was of an airy delivery that was neither in-your-face nor stodgy, and which entirely avoided the all too common headphone listening experience of the sound being extruded like toothpaste from a tube.

Tracks by Dylan and McCartney were delivered with more warmth



ABOVE: A-T's large earpads and unique Wing Support make for good general comfort. Drivers feature copper-covered aluminium wire to reduce moving mass and are in an aluminium housing

and less clarity than ideal but certainly weren't stripped of interest, and bass output was meatier than suggested by our Lab Test measurements.

VERDICT

We love the ATH-A900X's airy imaging and its ability to invite you into the music even though it lacks a little in transparency. If you can forgive it that, you will probably find its charms irresistible. ☺

'The Audio-Technica's airy delivery was neither in-your-face nor stodgy'

clamping force are damped with a plastic coating, thereby obviating the all-too-obvious structural resonance that inexplicably mars Audio-Technica's top-of-the-range ATH-W5000.

AIRY DELIVERY

Listening to the A900X took us back the better part of six years to a much earlier HFN headphone

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	115.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	39.4ohm @ 20Hz 45.3ohm @ 110Hz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±7.6dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	38Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	0.3% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.25in connector)	400g



Circumaural semi open-back dynamic headphone
 Made by: Beyerdynamic GmbH & Co. KG, Germany
 Supplied by: Polaraudio Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 01444 258258
 Web: <http://europe.beyerdynamic.com>; www.polaraudio.co.uk
 Price: £900

AUDIO
FILE

Beyerdynamic T1

The T1 looks smart, modern but restrained in silver-grey and black. Acoustic resistance, in the form of a fine mesh between the back of the driver in each capsule and the outside world, lets less sound in, or out, than a true open-back design but is less complete in its isolation than with the impervious enclosure of a closed-back design.

All the new-generation Beyerdynamic models prefixed 'T' benefit from Tesla technology drive units: the name of Nikola Tesla being invoked because it is honoured in the SI unit of magnetic flux density, and the design effort focused on increasing field strength within the magnet gap.

The neodymium ring magnet provides a large diameter vent for the centre of the 45mm driver, which has a multilayer diaphragm and 19mm lightweight voice coil of coated copper wire. In the case of 600ohm Beyerdynamic models, like the T1, the voice coil wire diameter is just 18µm (0.018mm).

This is also the first Beyerdynamic headphone to use angled drivers – although you wouldn't guess this from looking at the capsule exterior. Such an arrangement has a reputation for delivering a more spacious and natural stereo image.

Beyerdynamic understands how to make a headphone comfortable. With its wide, padded headband to

helps create a more natural listening experience.

Our lab tests showed that Beyerdynamic adheres pretty closely to the notion of the diffuse-field response being ideal for headphones, so it was no surprise to find an essentially neutral tonal balance, without the plumminess of excess bass and lower midrange, or the artificial sense of detail conferred by an over-energetic presence band or treble.

The T1 also has one of the best judged bass deliveries we've heard from a headphone, if not *the* best. In both quantity and quality it's spot on, and as a result it pitches double- and electric-bass lines with unusual precision. The treble is neither excessive nor does it hide its light under a bushel. In terms of quantity it's about right, although occasionally we did hear an over-energetic sibilant. The issue is rather one of *quality*, and it seems generic to all 'phones rather than a characteristic of the T1 in particular.

With, for instance, the 24-bit/96kHz download of Christy Baron's 'Got To Get You Into My Life' (available from HDtracks), the treble remained true to every other headphone we've experienced in lacking the naturalness of real high frequency sounds.

Few loudspeakers, let alone headphones, can capture the bell-like clarity of Emma Kirkby's voice as well as the T1 did on the heartfelt 'Full Fathom Five My Father Lies' (a 24-bit/88.2kHz rip from BIS-SACD-1505), where the large church acoustic was also notably

well portrayed. The 24-bit/96kHz 'Snowflake' from Kate Bush's *50 Words for Snow* was magical too. Every strand was exactly positioned and meticulously reproduced.

Peder Af Ugglas is never destined to be a superstar, we fear, but his agreeably laid-back 'Beyond' (ripped from the Opus 3 SACD and converted to 24-bit/88.2kHz using AudioGate) found the T1 showing



ABOVE: The T1 is classily understated in black and silver-grey. Its generously padded headband, soft earpads and modest clamping force prompt long, comfortable listening sessions

off its LF prowess, with it effortlessly distinguishing the contributions of bass guitar and kick-drum and affording them both full weight.

VERDICT

Beyerdynamic's new flagship is everything that a true audiophile headphone ought to be: comfortable to wear, neutral in tonal balance, informative and engaging to listen to across the gamut of musical genres. ☺

'Every strand of Kate Bush's "Snowflake" was meticulously positioned'

spread the weight across your scalp, its large and soft velour earpads and modest head clamping force, the T1 is suited to long listening sessions.

FINE TONAL BALANCE

As expected, the semi-open capsules provide little in the way of isolation of external sounds. But anyway, there's a theory that not shutting out the room acoustic

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	99.6dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	597ohm @ 3.4kHz 1.26kohm @ 81Hz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±7.9dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	<20Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	0.1% / 0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.25in connector)	520g

AUDIO
FILE

Circumaural open-back dynamic headphone
 Made by: Grado Labs Inc, NY, USA
 Supplied by: Armour Home Electronics Ltd
 Telephone: 01279 501111
 Web: www.gradolabs.com; www.armourhe.co.uk
 Price: £1990



Grado PS1000

Grado's PS1000 is, by a comfortable margin, the most expensive headphone we have ever reviewed. And it has to be said that it's something of a frump when compared to, say, the slick, modern-looking Sennheiser HD 800.

In fact it's much like every other Grado over-the-head headphone with a thin, unpadded headband, those trademark but rather crude and insubstantial looking adjustment poles, the round capsules and the shaped foam earpads. So it isn't a cosy companion for long sessions.

Exactly what makes the PS1000 a cut above others in the range isn't obvious but Grado offers precious few insights. We're told that it uses ultra-high purity long-crystal copper in its new eight-conductor cable and reconfigured voice coil, and that the capsule comprises an inner sleeve of cured mahogany surrounded by a machined alloy housing, cast in such a way as to increase its porosity. Together these suppress structural resonances.

We were told there's 'a newly reconfigured voice coil and diaphragm design', and that the PS1000 was conceived 'to extract low-level information out of any recording or live feed'. But that was it. Asking for Grado's philosophy regarding ideal headphone frequency response revealed only

'Providing extraordinary insight into recordings it justifies its "pro" moniker'

that it is 'an aesthetic judgement' – which doesn't readily explain why the responses of the PS1000, GS1000i and SR325i (three current models we've tested) are all markedly different.

So we can only speculate about aspects of the PS1000's design. We have no idea what the transducer diaphragm is, other than it is a clear plastic of some sort. The magnet

material is surely neodymium (ubiquitous in modern headphones) and the voice coil is almost certainly not edge-wound given the PS1000's less than exceptional sensitivity.

CHOOSY OVER MUSIC

The lab tests show the PS1000's frequency response is idiosyncratic. That peak in the upper-bass is, we're sure, an attempt to disguise the early bass roll-off that results from Grado's trademark foam earpads, which do not provide an airtight seal to the head. This arrangement has the advantage, though, of providing a consistent bass response pretty independent of head shape, and of eliminating an enclosed space between the drive unit and ear that would be subject to resonances.

At the other end of the frequency spectrum the PS1000's excessive high treble is less easy to explain, except as a deliberate ploy to add artificial 'detail'.

We like the PS1000 better than any Grado headphone we've heard before but for different reasons, and only on certain source material. We found the GS1000i [HFN May '11] had 'excessive treble output and a hump in the upper bass'. So too does the PS1000 but, as with the GS1000i, how these aberrations play out depends on what music you select.

The PS1000 can deliver extraordinary insight into the minutiae of recordings, in this one stroke justifying its 'professional' designation. 'Country Dreamer' from Wings' *Band On The Run* is a good example as this old recording is still capable of springing surprises. Such as when we played it through the PS1000 for the first time and on the opening guitar in the right channel heard fingering noises we'd never noticed before.

The downside came on items like 'Black Beauty' from Opus 3's *Showcase 1*. This lighthearted trad



ABOVE: All the familiar Grado features are in evidence in the PS1000: a thin unpadded headband, slider poles for capsule adjustment and large foam earpads. The driver is 40mm in diameter

jazz romp came over as a bit sterile and unrelenting via the PS1000, which lacked tonal warmth and a sense of space.

VERDICT

Grado's PS1000 is all about an exaggerated – but on the right programme, thrilling – sense of resolution and transparency. If you crave tonal neutrality it isn't the headphone for you, but its ability to dig deep is unique. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	108.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	31.1ohm @ 996Hz 54.6ohm @ 86Hz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±7.1dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	35Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	0.3% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.25in connector)	588g



Two-and-a-half way floorstanding loudspeaker
 Made by: Acoustic Energy Ltd, Gloucestershire
 Supplied by: Acoustic Energy Ltd
 Telephone: 01285 654432
 Web: www.acoustic-energy.co.uk
 Price: £999

AUDIO
FILE

Acoustic Energy Radiance 2

Sitting just below the Reference models in Acoustic Energy's line-up, its Radiance Series is intended to offer a good proportion of their abilities at a lower price. The Radiance 2 occupies the centre of the three-strong range of stereo designs (a matching subwoofer and centre channel are also available) and utilises three drive units in a two-and-a-half-way configuration.

The two main drivers are 130mm in diameter and consist of a pressed alloy cone with matching conical dust cap, allied to a rubber surround. Voice-coils are wound with aluminium wire for lightness; each driver has its own enclosure with separate port tuning.

The treble is handled by a ring radiator type tweeter, where the

its footprint and allow easy spike fitment. Sadly, these are not very pretty to look at! Available cabinet finishes are Natural and Dark Ash real wood veneers.

ASTOUNDING CLARITY

The weighty nature of the Radiances' cabinets proved to be a surprisingly apt analogy for their sound, as these loudspeakers offer a sense of authority, scale and confidence rare at the price.

Although our lab tests suggest bass extension is a little limited – compared to, say, Monitor Audio's similarly-priced Silver RX8 – we never felt this to be so in practice. The bass was punchy, taut and superbly detailed, gripping the fretless bass from the re-release of Paul Simon's *Graceland* [Sony] by the scruff of the neck, and capturing the rhythms perfectly.

Most notable, however, was the astounding clarity and central image stability

conferred onto female vocalists. With Nanci Griffith's *Late Night Grande Hotel* [MCA 10306] playing, we were immediately brought the impression of her face, large as life, hovering directly between the cabinets! (Miss Griffith's magnificent voice can be strident and rather uncomfortable through less than sympathetic transducers.) Backing instrumentation was expertly arranged behind the main performers and the treble was an absolute masterclass in clarity, detail and superlative crispness.

VERDICT

Everything the Radiance 2 speakers play is an absolute joy to hear. With their superb build quality and impressive weight they show just what a high level of sonic satisfaction can be achieved for a £1000 outlay. ☺

RIGHT: Finished in Natural or Dark Ash veneers the Radiance 2 has two 130mm main drivers and a tweeter with Acoustic Energy's new DXT Lens waveguide. The speakers may be bi-wired



'Nanci Griffith's face was hovering directly between the cabinets, large as life'

dome is anchored both around its edge and in the centre, for better controlled motion and reduced distortion. The tweeter is located in the centre of a newly designed waveguide that Acoustic Energy calls the DXT Lens. This is said to control the unit's output very precisely to maximise high frequency dispersion, improve off-axis performance and ensure a smooth frequency response. AE also claims that the technology used in the three drive units allows a simple crossover: the circuit has no resistors at all.

The cabinets of the Radiance 2s are impressively solid and surprisingly weighty given the compact dimensions. The rear profile is curved in order to minimise internal standing waves and four outrigger zinc alloy feet bolt securely to the base to increase

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	90.3dB/88.7dB/88.3dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.7ohm @ 198Hz 13.0ohm @ 2.0kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–28° @ 6.8kHz 35° @ 954Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.7dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	56Hz/>40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL at 1m)	0.3% / 0.2% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	920x185x255mm

AUDIO FILE

Three-way standmount loudspeaker
Made by: B&W Group Ltd, West Sussex
Supplied by: B&W Group Ltd
Telephone: 0800 232 1513
Web: www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk
Price: £3000



B&W CM10

Here, B&W has launched a floorstander that extends the CM Series upwards and fits into the price slot vacated by the old 804S.

Like the 804, the CM10 uses a separate (but new) tweeter module. A standard 50µm-thick dome with most of the centre removed forms a stiffening ring and on the front of this is stuck a full dome only 35µm thick. This gives a higher first breakup frequency, said to be 38kHz, yet with a similar moving mass, compared to the standard 50µm dome.

As with the 800 Series models, the tweeter – now protected by a mesh – is decoupled from its housing. A Nautilus tapered tube is screwed to the back of the magnet, and the combination is supported by isolating gel mounts.

Displaying the familiar yellow cone of woven Kevlar, the midrange

ABOVE: With a new tweeter in its own housing, the CM10 combines a 150mm FST Kevlar midrange unit with three 165mm paper/Kevlar bass units

stage, with an even and seemingly undistorted bass.

CLEAN AND OPEN

We found that there were certain benefits to be had from bi-wiring the CM10s. Making the comparison via Myriam Alter's delightful *Where Is There* [Enja], we experienced a slightly freer-breathing and more dynamic quality to the bass. We also felt that there was perhaps a little more air around the instruments.

With classical music, we were impressed by the CM10's ability to produce natural, free-sounding string timbres. It could convey the huge acoustic around the Pacific SO as they played Respighi's *Church Windows* [Reference Recordings],

but it did well on more intimate material too.

Listening to Rosa Passos and her solo album *Rosa* [Telarc], we felt that the CM10 really brought out the

pure sound of that gorgeous voice along with the rich timbres of her guitar, conveying the calm insulated silence of the studio as well as its supportive acoustic.

With Simple Minds and *Cry* [Eagle], the sound became truly enveloping as wave after wave of electronic sounds washed over us. The speakers were great on more visceral music too, and with Florence And The Machine's 'Dog Days Are Over' [Lungs, Island/Moshi Moshi], the stunning contrasts and massive drum sounds made it a glorious *tour de force*.

VERDICT

Thanks to its pod-mount tweeter and FST mid driver, the CM10 offers a beautifully clean, detailed midrange and treble, with an open and impressive soundstage. It does, however, need a capable amp to give of its best. ☺

'Stunning contrasts with massive drums made it a glorious *tour de force*'

unit is of the 'surroundless' or FST type that first appeared in the Nautilus 800 Series. But the CM10 is the first speaker below that series to have a decoupled FST driver. Its gel mountings are compressed by a tensioning rod from the back panel.

With the CM10's tweeter-on-top format, the midrange compartment could be moved upwards, freeing up more space for the bass enclosure section, which comprises three 165mm paper/Kevlar-coned bass units, reflex-loaded by a rear B&W Flowport.

Stability is assured by using the bolt-on flat plinths extending each speaker's footprint. Carpet-piercing spikes are provided, along with rubber feet as an alternative.

B&W suggests setting the CM10 at least 0.5m from back and side walls but, moving these speakers further out into the room, we were rewarded with a very open stereo



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.5dB/89.4dB/88.9dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.9ohm @ 123Hz 22.8ohm @ 59Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–68° @ 72Hz 47° @ 1.2kHz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.9dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	58Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.4% / <0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	992x200x337mm

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AUDIO
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Floorstanding three-way loudspeaker
 Made by: Alfred & Partners, Tallinn, Estonia
 Supplied by: Kog Audio Ltd
 Telephone: 024 7722 0650
 Web: www.estelon.com; www.kogaudio.com
 Price: £25,000

hi-fine
 NEWS
 EDITOR'S
 CHOICE

Estelon XB

These Estelons deftly bridge the gap between the radically bizarre and domestically acceptable.

Simply put, they look wonderful. Made from a marble based composite, standard finishes include black or white gloss, or matt black for £22,000 per pair. The review pair was finished in 'Red Rocket Liquid Gloss' (+£3000). The same level of finish is also offered in gloss silver or matt silver. A third level (+£2000), provides matt white, 'Blue Cobalt' or 'Deep Purple'.

A main woofer sits at the bottom of the enclosure, then a driverless span of cabinet until you reach the upper section, with the tweeter placed directly below the midbass. The three drive units are cutting-edge, German-made Accuton drivers – the 220mm bass unit employs an ultra-rigid ceramic sandwich dome, the 160mm mid-

'It was a case of the system shouting "This is what it's all about"'

bass unit features a titanium voice coil former and the 25mm tweeter has an ultra-hard ceramic dome.

Other internal details include a specific type of Kubala-Sosna-made cabling and a minimalist second-order crossover design fitted with 'Mii Teflon-Hybrid' capacitors and air core inductors, the network encased in a separate chamber.

FORM MATCHES MUSIC

With power courtesy of Devialet, we fed the Estelons a barrage of tracks that, inadvertently, complemented their mien, starting with Eleanor McEvoy's piano/vocal-only rendition of 'God Only Knows' [*If You Leave...* Mosco]. After careful placement with toe-in, the Estelon XB did something wonderful: it matched its physical form to the music! You're probably tiring of *HFN's* continued adoration of Ms McEvoy, but suffice it to say, the Estelon could have

RIGHT: Cabinets have chamfered baffles to minimise diffraction effects. 'Punch nets' protect the driver fronts

been made for female vocals. Perhaps we had stumbled upon the Estelon's forte?

We moved to Albert King's 'The Very Thought Of You' [*Born Under A Bad Sign*, Stax] with backing by no less than Booker T and the MGs. Piano and subtle drums far right, Mr King strumming guitar and singing in the middle, the Memphis Horns stage left. Why the Estelon and this track so loved each other is down to a synergy that occurs often enough to make us love and appreciate high-end audio. It was a case of a sound system shouting, 'This is what it's all about!'

That noted, knowledge of the listening material as heard though other systems pointed out a minor demerit. The caveat is obvious:

if you're a hard-core bass junkie, look for another solution. Two standouts, though, ensure that the XB is worthy of your attention. Joe Brown's heart-warming 'I'll See You In My Dreams'

from the astounding *The Ukulele Album* [Joe Brown Records] was rich, glowing, scintillating. All we could think of was Burl Ives in the old Disney lump-in-the-throat-former, *Summer Magic*, warm 'n' fuzzy but in the nicest way.

And then there was Keb' Mo'. If a speaker can 'like' a recording, *Peace... Back By Popular Demand* [Okeh/Epic] struck the right note, any concerns about the odd behaviour at the lowest registers simply not mattering at all.

VERDICT

A slight disconnect between the mid and lower bass creates a lightness to the sound when mass is required. That aside, the Estelon XB is a smooth, silky, sexy performer that simply adores female vocals – apt, as this is a mighty fine speaker that just happens to have Sophia Loren's curves. ☺



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	83.4dB/84.1dB/84.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.9ohm @ 53Hz 20.7ohm @ 1.2kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–54° @ 2.2kHz 60° @ 78Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.3dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	See text / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.5% / 0.3% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	1260x420x590mm



Two-and-a-half way floorstanding loudspeaker
 Made by: GamuT Audio, Denmark
 Supplied by: Audio Reference Ltd
 Telephone: 01252 702 705
 Web: www.gamutaudio.com; www.audioreference.co.uk
 Price: £8460

AUDIO
FILE

GamuT M'inenT M5

The M'inenT range (one standmount and two floorstanders) is new from GamuT. The M5s have a tall and commanding presence yet somehow seem less bulky than their paper dimensions would suggest.

The cabinet is exceptionally well finished in a flawless real wood veneer and a wide range of finishes is available at extra cost. The three drive units are configured as a two-and-a-half way design, with crossover points at 500Hz and 2.25kHz. Handling the bass end of the spectrum is a 7in driver with rubber surround and a GamuT hand-treated, wood fibre cone. The 7in bass/midrange driver is again based around a hand-treated cone, but this time with the addition of 'slices' into the material which are then filled with damping glue. This is claimed to control cone breakup.

The Scan-Speak Revelator tweeter is a double ring radiator

that sit on the drive unit fixings. Finally, the manual supplied covers the usual connection, running-in and general care aspects, and also includes a guide to optimal positioning of the speakers within the listening environment.

A ROUNDED VIEW

The GamuTs offer an easy sense of integration from low bass to high treble and the outputs of the drive units coalesce to offer a beautiful performance 'in the round'.

A measured dip in output across the upper midband is something that one gradually becomes aware of, but in a strange way it can work to the M5s' advantage. With Diana Krall's vocals on *When I look In Your Eyes* CD [GRP] the performance was pulled back a little – but the overall result was to seat Miss Krall at her rightful position, beside her piano.

Ultimately the GamuTs do not seek to impress by any sense of false showmanship but are more than capable of generating a very open and capacious soundstage. Their low end is deep, tuneful and big-hearted –

spinning 'The Man Who Sold The World' from Nirvana's *Unplugged* LP [Geffen] gave a bass drum that was as vivid as we have ever heard it; each strike was firm and taut but without any sense of overhang.

The gently strummed electric guitar that begins Jeff Buckley's 'So Real' from his *Grace* LP [Simply Vinyl] had a menacing intent to it and Buckley's vocals themselves sounded stunningly heartfelt. And when the track moved up a gear, the M5s exhibited no sense of strain or compression.

VERDICT

These M'inenT M5 loudspeakers are a very welcome addition to the UK market. They require some care in equipment matching to give of their best but, once configured optimally, offer a refined and musically adept alternative to the mainstream. ☺

RIGHT: Drivers include a 7in wood fibre coned bass unit crossing to a 'sliced cone' 7in mid at 550Hz. Tweeter uses an 'impulse and resonance optimized' double ring radiator with GamuT's own stainless steel wave guide. Rear dual ports feature 3mm-thick high pressure polymer tubes with flared aluminium openings. The input terminals allow bi-wiring



'On Nirvana's *Unplugged*, the bass drum was as vivid as we have heard it'

design rather than a true dome. Its front spike is an integral part of the design, shaped to aid dispersion and clamp the centre of the dome.

GamuT calls its crossover circuit a 'Non Resonant Linked Impulse' solution controlling interactions between drivers, cabinet and the circuitry itself.

The speakers are wired internally with 'WormHole Signature' cabling, another GamuT development comprising individually insulated conductors surrounded by a special woven dielectric, all inside a second cover with copper threads within it. GamuT claims that this 'permits the effective termination of unwanted stored energy, thus optimising impulse behaviour'.

To round the package off, a smart grille appears to locate on just two holes in the cabinet but it is further stabilised using magnets

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.2dB/88.2dB/87.3dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.5ohm @ 167Hz 9.8ohm @ 51Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–49° @ 63Hz 35° @ 1.6kHz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.0dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	43Hz / 39.3kHz / >40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.4% / 0.3% / 0.4%
Dimensions (HWD)	1210x226x575mm

**AUDIO
FILE**

Two-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Made by: Kudos Audio, County Durham
Supplied by: Kudos Audio
Telephone: 0845 458 6698
Web: www.kudosaudio.com
Price: £4250



Kudos Cardea Super 20

In 2012 Kudos introduced the £3500 Cardea Super 20 [HFN June '12], a go-for-broke 'supercharged' version of the company's 12 litre two-way standmount. Now the company has followed up with a 'Super' version of its Cardea C20 floorstander.

Kudos has worked extensively with SEAS in developing specific drivers for its various speaker models, the Super 20 employing the 29mm 'Crescendo K2' soft dome tweeter first introduced in the £13,000 Kudos Titan T88 flagship.

The bass/mid driver in the Super 20 is a newly-developed version of the SEAS 18cm unit with hand-treated paper cone. It's upgraded with copper shorting rings in its voice coil, designed to reduce eddy

The plinth is a rigid tri-laminate structure of steel, damping compound and MDF.

VIVID BALANCE

Sounding best when heard slightly off-axis, the Super 20 is very much a chip off the old block: just like its smaller Super 10 brother it sounds buoyant and engaging, its strength in the presence region making its music delivery highly communicative. We played Talk Talk's *Spirit Of Eden* [Parlophone], the dark and haunting atmosphere of the track 'Desire' sounding particularly spacious thanks to the speakers' vivid balance.

The organ and guitar sounded deliciously authentic, the percussive embellishments highly resolved in this recording's artificially spacious sound image. The low frequency grumblings created by the loosely-skinned drum and deep bass notes were served up with commendable weight by this compact floorstander.

The Super 20 does seem to slightly accentuate the leading edges of transients, acoustic guitars having a bit more of a 'stringy' and slightly less 'wooden body' type of balance than some listeners might prefer. This could be observed with the duelling guitars of Acoustic Alchemy's Nick Webb and Greg Carmichael on the title track of the duo's *Reference Point* album [GRP], the speakers' forward presence bestowing a rather hyped sound that accentuated the squeak of fingers on strings and fretboards.

VERDICT

Kudos' new S20 floorstander is quite an expensive proposition. But you get audiophile-grade internal components, excellent build quality and meticulous pair matching. It's a loudspeaker that is indeed a little bit special. ☺

RIGHT: The 18cm bass/mid driver with its hand-treated paper cone, copper shorting ring and aluminium phase plug is made to Kudos' specification by SEAS, along with the 29mm Crescendo K2 fabric domed tweeter. Cardea models come with just one set of input terminals, as single wiring is preferred to bi-wiring



'Deep bass notes were served up with commendable weight'

currents and minimise odd-order harmonics, along with an aluminium phase plug to act as a heatsink.

The aim of the Cardea designs is that the drivers should integrate as seamlessly as possible, requiring only a simple low-order crossover. As in the Super 10, crossover components in the Super 20 are individually tested and hand selected during assembly. These include Mundorf inductors and resistors and 'Supreme' (silver/gold/oil) capacitors.

The enclosure is extremely rigid, formed of 18mm high density MDF with extensive bracing and internal damping with various (unspecified) compounds to minimise resonance, with a reflex port venting at the bottom of the cabinet.

The enclosure 'floats' visually above a stabilising plinth which provides a fixed boundary gap for the downward-firing port.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.3dB/87.1dB/86.9dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	7.0ohm @ 164Hz 32.9ohm @ 1.9kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–36° @ 3.7kHz 39° @ 780Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.6dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	50Hz / 39.0kHz/38.4kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	2.1% / 1.1% / 1.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	930x200x270mm

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AUDIO
FILE

Three-way, sealed-box floorstanding loudspeaker
 Made by: Magico, Berkeley, CA, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.magico.net; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £28,900



Magico S5

Magico has wisely decided to 'trickle down' its Q series know-how into a new and mildly more affordable series: the S1 and S5 floorstanders. The latter is a good £11k shy of the similarly-proportioned Q3 [HFN Sep '11] and yet it offers almost exactly the same sensitivity, an even flatter response but a measurably and palpably superior bass extension.

The S5's body comprises three main sections – a thick alloy baffle plus two curved, 0.5in-thick side extrusions that increase stiffness while minimising internal standing waves. The extrusions are finished in a range of six high-gloss automotive paints. Custom colours are offered along with a fully anodised finish, at extra cost.

Inside, the shell is connected and also braced via four open-section frames and the drivers are (unlike

'We could almost envisage the colour of the wooden staves used'

the Q3's) directly connected to the S5's baffle.

Its tweeter is based on the Scan-Speak Illuminator platform with beryllium diaphragm, although Magico has specified its own magnet system, voice coil and suspension. The midrange is Magico's familiar 6in 'Nano-Tec' unit, an asymmetrical three-layer sandwich of carbon skins with a Rohacell centre, embedded in a nanotube thermoplastic resin.

The S5's bass drivers are very different from those used in the Q-series, however: they are a hybrid of Magico's carbon 'Nano tubes' for the dust cap and aluminium for the cone. There's a custom-made magnet system tailored to the S5's sealed box alignment and a suspension that offers a huge 1in linear excursion. Importantly, the S5 does share Magico's 'elliptical crossover technology', employing

RIGHT: Magico's custom-made drivers include a beryllium-domed tweeter, 'Nano-Tec' midrange and two aluminium/Nano composite bass units

superior Mundorf film capacitors and air-cored copper foil inductors.

ULTRA RESOLUTION

If we had to sum up the S5s in a word then that would be 'hi-res' such is their ultra-vivid and ultra-clean sound. And we don't mean the kind of squeaky, acerbically clean intonation that'll have you rushing for a lush tube amp: no, the S5 is simply exquisitely revealing of everything in your system and on your recordings.

Driving Devialet D-Premier amps via an AES link from dCS's Vivaldi upsampler, the low pipe notes from Bach's *Tocatta & Fugue* [Opus 3] were possessed of a gloriously rich resonance, a clean reverberation

informed by the ambience of the venue. Vocals truly *speak* to you – you'll hear Kate Bush's crushed highlights on the 'hi-res' 24-bit/96kHz download of *50 Words*

For Snow and, by contrast, the gloriously well-recorded timbre of Eric Bibb and guitar through *Blues, Ballads & Work Songs* [Opus 3]. Here the rich gruffness of his voice is joined by the instrumental tails of 12-string and slide guitar, a musical mirage of compelling intensity. *Far More Drums* by the Hohner Percussion Ensemble [DMP] is another tricky customer, but the percussion sounded so detailed that we could almost envisage the colour of the hard wooden staves that punctuate the album!

VERDICT

This is an exceptional speaker where unprecedented neutrality and bass extension for the cabinet size are wrought at the expense of a challenging load, so the S5 should be partnered with an equally exceptional amplifier – D'Agostino, Constellation or Devialet. ⚡



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.6dB/87.4dB/87.3dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.5ohm @ 62Hz 33.7ohm @ 28Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–80° @ 34Hz 38° @ 22Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	±1.1dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 300Hz/10kHz)	33Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.1% / 0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1220x350x380mm

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Peak Consult Princess V Signature

Peak Consult is a Danish boutique high-end loudspeaker manufacturer which can arguably be regarded as a Danish equivalent of Sonus faber. The engineering focus, lush aesthetics and fastidious attention to detail are certainly at one with the philosophies of the Italian speaker brand, and price points, from the entry-level Princess V to the six-figure Peak Consult Dragon, are up there too.

The Princess V is a compact yet extremely hefty speaker with superb woodwork and an all-Danish driver array. The tweeter is a custom Scan-Speak model with a 1in silk dome and the main driver a bespoke 5in AudioTechnology unit. The latter features a unique cone shape and

take the gloss off an otherwise very polished presentation. However, the welcome pack is superb, with impedance graphs, brochures, manuals and the personal business card of designer Per Kristofferson!

IT'S A GROWER

The large rear port suggests placement a decent distance from rear and side walls. Suitably set, these speakers need very little tweaking. Increasing or decreasing toe-in makes only a very subtle difference to the sound.

The Princess V is not going to make you sit up and say 'wow' from the first encounter. It's a grower: smooth, sophisticated and never fatiguing. With Antimatter's *Live @ An Club* [Music In Stone MIS 102], Mike Moss's emotion-filled vocal on the track 'Leaving Eden' had admirable presence and a real goose-bump-inducing scale that belied the

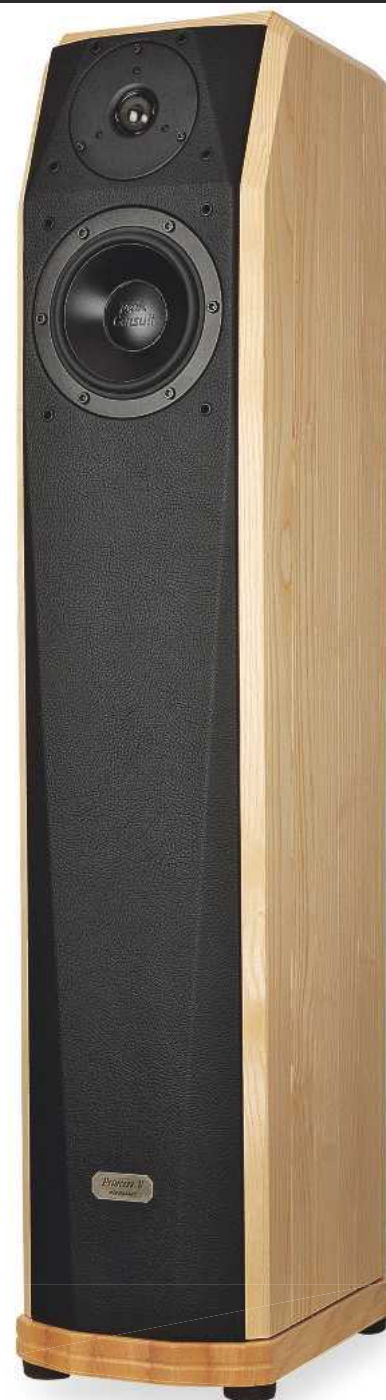
Princess's bijou driver pairing. The detailing in the hard struck acoustic guitar had depth and vibrancy akin to the real instrument, yet lacked a little in leading-edge attack.

This is a speaker that errs on the safe side of neutral yet avoids the shut-in sound that often accompanies such a balance. Moss's voice was intense and precisely imaged while the ambience of the venue was crafted with excellent back-to-front depth. Bass is admirable for a 5in driver in such a small enclosure. Rhythmically the Princess V cannot be faulted either.

VERDICT

The Princess's superb build and finish is a joy to behold and its mellifluous musicality is to savour. It's a speaker that delivers great musical involvement and will never have you wincing at a bum note or a harshly recorded disc. Ⓟ

RIGHT: The 50mm-thick HDF and timber laminate cabinet of the Princess V houses a 1in Scan-Speak silk dome tweeter and custom designed 5in AudioTechnology mid/bass unit. The rear bass port is large relative to the real internal volume. The single pair of terminals means you cannot bi-wire



'A goose-bump-inducing scale belied the speaker's bijou driver pairing'

vented magnet assembly nearly the same size as the cone. A back-slope on the baffle aims to correct any phase errors between the units.

The cabinet side walls boast a 25mm laminate of HDF and a 25mm 'plank' of timber which is milled, fitted and oiled to finish. With textured leather covering the front and rear baffles, the result is a natural and very organic look. Our ash sample was perhaps a little pale in colour but rosewood and (at extra cost) walnut and 'striped' finishes are available too.

Inside the cabinet, just below the main driver, is a sealed baffle plate isolating a relatively small enclosure behind the drivers. Beneath the baffle plate, the much larger lower section is filled with a very coarse sand-like mineral aggregate.

Both drivers are supplied with relatively basic MDF frame/cloth grilles on plastic pin lugs. This does

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	83.7dB/85.3dB/85.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.0ohm @ 229Hz 24.4ohm @ 76Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–56° @ 95Hz 47° @ 27Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.0dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	45Hz / 23.3kHz/22.4kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.0% / 0.3% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1030x211x320mm

Burmester 101 Integrated Amplifier & 102 CD Player

News from the Classic Line

The 101 Integrated Amplifier is the latest integrated amplifier in the Burmester product range and a supreme example for the perfect combination of efficient class D power sections and an analogue power supply. With its power reserves thus made available the 101 easily achieves in a compact design the warm and well-balanced sound which is known to be a trademark of the Burmester tone. The switchable „Smooth“ function produces a rounded and detailed sound image even with low volume levels. Within the Burmester sound world the 101 integrated amplifier commends itself as a perfect game partner for the 102 CD player.



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Wilson Audio Alexia

Customer and retailer reactions have suggested the need for a new Wilson speaker closer in performance to the universally-acclaimed Alexandria XLF [HFN Nov '12], but one that swallowed no more real estate than a Sasha. With a footprint close to the Sasha's, the Alexia hosts only a slight increase in height, due mainly to the necessarily larger woofer enclosure.

To provide a goodly portion of the XLF's adaptability, precision and coherence, the smaller Alexia had to offer adjustability of the midrange and tweeter positioning with to-the-millimetre accuracy, according to room specifics and the location of the owner's 'hot seat'. That meant a head section with movable

'The sound had the clarity and presentation of a 4K television display'

segments, but with a volume akin to that of the original WATT.

The designers focused initially on avoiding the introduction of resonances and upper assembly instability – crucial because the integrity of the upper structure would determine whether or not the new speaker could, in Wilson's words, 'substantially expand on the dynamic performance, resolution and bandwidth of our existing compact loudspeakers.'

What you see here, then, is a genuinely manageable floorstander with the complex time-domain adjustment of the much larger XLF. Fitted to the bottom enclosure are drivers designed specifically for the Alexia; they include 8in and 10in pulp/paper cone woofers. For the midrange, Wilson chose the same cellulose fibre/carbon 7in unit used in the XLF. Above it is the new 'Convergent Synergy' tweeter, a silk

RIGHT: With drivers in three chassis, the Alexia's two upper sections may be positioned with the greatest precision

dome unit related to the driver that first appeared in the XLF.

Other details include a rear port for the woofer, rear venting for the mid and a sealed housing for the tweeter. There are adjustable spikes beneath and robust speaker terminals that favour spade connectors. They are available in a range of custom colours.

A REVELATION

Auditioning in two systems exposed one overriding aspect of the Alexia's behaviour: it's a loudspeaker that reveals all one could wish to know about every part of the audio chain that precedes it.

'Da Doo Ron Ron' by the Crystals comes with *A Christmas Gift For You From Phil Spector* [Sony]. Buried in the 'Wall of Sound' are assorted

percussive instruments, glorious saxes, handclaps and a tinkly piano. Oh, and lush multi-part harmonies. The sound radiating from the Alexias had the clarity, the content and the presentation of a 4K display.

'Manhattan' from *Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Rodgers & Hart Song Book* [Verve] features woodwinds and strings as lush, seductive and joyous as any to be found behind Sinatra, Cole or Martin. A liquidity and an opulence emanated from the Alexias, a lucidity where every fleeting quaver was detectable with an unparalleled authenticity.

VERDICT

The Alexia is the compact model Dave Wilson was surely destined to design. Why? Because it is, literally, a scaled-down XLF, the latter embodying the current evolutionary state of his philosophy since the first WAMM. A new reference then. ☺



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.8dB/89.8dB/89.6dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	1.8ohm @ 85Hz 9.7ohm @ 20kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–46° @ 57Hz 34° @ 3.3kHz
Pair matching (400Hz–20kHz)	±1.4dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	35Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.2% / 0.5% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	1353x387x537mm



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USB SilverPlus
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 Supplied by: The Chord Company
 Telephone: 01980 625700
 Web: www.chord.co.uk
 Price: £55/1.5m



Audioquest Carbon USB

Midway through Audioquest's five-strong USB cable range is this 'Carbon' version which, fortunately, contains no graphite at all (although there's a woven carbon fibre-esque jacket).

The four A and B plug contacts are silver-plated and the conductors are all solid copper-core types, the pair that carry the differential data also silver-plated and insulated with a thicker HDPE dielectric than the +5V supply and ground conductors.

In the lab tests, our 1.5m sample offered a fast 11.9nsec risetime with low deterministic jitter.

GRAPHIC GRAPHITE

Audioquest's lean and 'transparent' presentation brought a fresh

perspective to the music in play. With 'Hotel California' from The Eagles' 1994 live set *Hell Freezes Over* [Geffen] it sounded as if the guitarist was plucking those strings closer to the bridge than the neck, the sound full of life and vitality.

The triangle that announces Oscar Peterson's 'You Look Good To Me' [*We Get Requests* – Verve/FIM reissue] had a pure-sounding ring – many 'polite-sounding' cables will mute this metallic 'ting'. It made the Peterson trio sound fun and jolly, never lapsing into edginess.

And, despite the age of the source, it also brought out the life, pace and youthful energy of The Beatles' rousing 'Come Together', from their recent 24-bit remaster of *Abbey Road*. The 'speed' of



ABOVE:
 Audioquest's Carbon USB cable has solid copper-core conductors in a woven carbon fibre-esque outer jacket. USB A and B plug contacts are silver-plated

the guitars, vocals and Ringo's effervescent percussion were traded for a slight loss in deep, resonant bass but unless you were using big floorstanders (or a sub) you'd likely be so carried along by the musical tide that you'd not notice.

VERDICT

Audioquest's Carbon cable gets a warm recommendation. It proves to be a very upbeat sounding cable, if not as spacious as the very best. ☺

Chord Company USB SilverPlus

There's a real jump between Chord's entry-level SilverPlus at £45/0.75m and its high-end USBs (at £400 and £750 per metre). Chord uses gold-plated contacts and shells for its A and B connectors while the differential data pair employs silver-plated OF copper strands insulated with LDPE. The ensemble is fully screened, its soft white PVC sleeve complementing the blue and white moulded plugs. SilverPlus offers a 13.5nsec risetime (fractionally slower than other 1.5m types) but its waveshape has little distortion.

SUPER STEREO

The overwhelmingly positive reaction of our panel (on three separate occasions) put Chord's

SilverPlus top-of-the-heap as a sanely-priced cable. It's extremely open-sounding – typically fresh, effusive and bubbling with detail without ever sounding forced, bright or in-your-face.

The atmosphere of The Eagles' live 'Hotel California' was extremely realistic. 'Did you hear that guy whistling way back there?', remarked one listener admiringly. Chord's cable did the very same thing with our Oscar Peterson track, creating a huge image without blowing out of proportion the perspective of the piano, percussion and strings.

In tonal balance, SilverPlus brings with it a great sense of spaciousness and transparency. Percussion has fantastic sparkle, a vivid life without



ABOVE: The Chord SilverPlus has gold-plated USB connectors and shells, the cable plugs attractively finished in blue and white

a hint of brashness. And The Beatles' remasters? No longer a 'period' piece, this sounded like it was recorded yesterday.

VERDICT

Chord's SilverPlus will likely appear on many audiophile's shortlists. So vivid is the presentation that it can sound like 'enhanced stereo'. It will have you digging through 'difficult' recordings just to discover what might now lie within them. ☺

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Ecosse Reference SMS2.4

We were hugely impressed by the refined performance of Ecosse's Reference SMS2.15 solid-core speaker cable (£349 for a 3m pair) in our Group Test earlier this year [*HFN* Jan '13]. This more costly Reference

'We found Pino Palladino's lugubrious bass especially potent'

SMS2.4 loudspeaker cable features a considerably more elaborate multi-core construction.

It's one of Ecosse's high-end cable range employing 'Super-Monocrystal' conductors in which the OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) mono crystal wire undergoes an additional heating cycle in its manufacturing process. Says Ecosse: 'It's the

purity of the grain structure which defines a conductor's ability to transmit audiophile quality sound, not just the purity of the copper ingot before smelting. By heating and re-crystallising the metal we achieve a conductor that exhibits exceptional linearity through the audio frequency band.'

Although large in diameter the SMS2.4 is highly flexible. Within the cable's PVC outer jacket each conductor has two

concentrically wound bundles of multistrand wires of differing cross-sectional area, insulated with a polypropylene dielectric. The bundles are tightly woven in a 'rope-lay' construction and twisted in a precise helix.



POTENT BASS

Auditioned through our test system the Ecosse Reference

ABOVE: Hollow 4mm 'z/x' banana plugs are compatible with BFA speaker terminals. Spade connectors can also be specified

SMS2.4 sounded wide open and uncompressed. Subjectively it certainly sounds like a wide bandwidth cable, dispensing extended and powerful bass and conveying plenty of 'air' at HF.

It's especially invigorating with rock recordings. Listening to the electric version of the title track from Paul Rodgers' *Muddy Water Blues* album [Victory Music] we found Pino Palladino's lugubrious yet intoxicating bass contribution especially potent, while Jason Bonham's drum kit assault was truly explosive. Set against a spookily black background the musicians were depicted lucidly in the soundstage. Subtle variations in reverb applied to Rodgers' voice were clearly portrayed thanks to the cable's 'airy' quality – with a lovely sense of image space and depth.

Hi-res recordings similarly benefited from the cable's dynamically free and open sound. The *Presto* from Haydn's Quartet in D, Op.76 [2L Records, 24/96 download] was conveyed with a hearty vitality and no trace of high frequency harshness.

VERDICT

If expensive, this cable is a fraction of the price commanded by the most exotic designs and can be regarded as excellent value for high-end systems, its performance sufficiently transparent to do justice to the very best components. It sounds airy and open at the top end, and its powerful bass should ensure a hearty performance from large floorstanding speakers. ☺



ABOVE: An ornamental block conceals the exit of main conductors. For the termination, Ecosse says its 'Super-solder' provides high vibration tolerance

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Fisher AD 800

In the early 1970s Sanyo was a UK market leader in the field of music centres that were extremely popular here, but its separate hi-fi units were not as successful. It was intended that the acquisition of the Fisher brand (in 1975) would solve this problem and less than a year after the CD format had first been made commercially available by Philips and Sony, it launched its first machine, offered in the UK as the Fisher AD 800.

A vertical front loader, the AD 800 was a confident entry into the digital field. One reason Sanyo was able to bring this model to market so rapidly was its use of integrated circuits made by Sony. This set the basic architecture of the Fisher AD 800 as a 16-bit design with no oversampling or digital filter.

A single Sony CX20017 16-bit DAC was shared between the two channels with the left and right

'A tight, brisk bass was a positive feature of the Fisher AD 800'

signals being separated later in the analogue domain – a familiar Japanese practice. This approach, and the absence of oversampling, meant that high-order filter blocks were required to attenuate any signals above the audible range.

Though Sanyo relied heavily on Sony technology for the AD 800, the servo circuit and optical deck were constructed by Sanyo, as were

the bulk of the passive components and many of the non-Sony ICs.

The mechanism was simply constructed, being composed mainly from steel pressings. A brush-type DC motor was used to spin the disc. Whereas many manufacturers chose to make their first CD models 'statement pieces', the basic painted mouldings of the AD 800's cabinet are disarmingly modest, and the quality of construction isn't outwardly better than that of a budget cassette deck of the period.

The front panel is dominated by a bottom-hinged CD loader into which the disc is dropped, initiating the loading process automatically. On the right-hand side there's a large membrane-type keypad and displays for the track time, track number and index or the sequence for programmed track replay.

The programming mode is rather confusing, but functions rapidly once you get the hang of it, although the AD 800 takes a while to cue up a song. The usual keys are provided for skipping tracks and moving forwards or back during a particular

selection, but it is possible to go beyond the recorded content of the disc and then have to completely re-start the playback process to get the sound back!



SOUNDS LIKE A SONY

We were pleased to find that not only was the background subjectively silent, but the mechanism made no audible noises

ABOVE: In Japan the AD 800 front-loading CD player bore the Sanyo logo and was known as the DAD 8. The 'Studio Standard' label appeared on UK versions to help differentiate it from Sanyo's music centres and hi-fi separates

that you would notice from the listening position. Given the sheer amount of Sony hardware inside, it's perhaps no surprise that the AD 800 sounds very similar to a CDP-101. In short, this means that the bass is full but a bit metallic while there is an amount of phase-related confusion in the treble. A bright midrange is another feature. The result of this is that vocals enjoy a real presence lift, making song lyrics very easy to follow, while instruments such as brass and woodwind gain an extra bit of early multi-bit CD 'polish'.

We tried a selection of CDs broadly contemporaneous with the machine, including Alison Moyet's first solo album *Alf* [CBS]. The abrupt percussion that runs through all the tracks was pushed firmly centre stage by a bright and sparkling presentation. Moyet's vocals, although explicit, were tainted by a slightly gritty quality, but a tight, brisk bass was a positive feature of the AD 800. There was no smear or one-note boom – everything down at the bottom end sounded precise.

With Svendsen's *Romance in G* [DG] the richness of the woodwind and the delicacy of the strings were communicated particularly well, with only a slight trace of steely harshness around the high notes. The space around the instruments was noteworthy too.

VERDICT

The Fisher AD 800 looks almost too small and playfully styled to be a first-generation CD machine. The Sony-based electronics provide a distinctly 'Japanese' sound, instantly evocative of the early CD era, making this model a particularly interesting purchase for any keen vintage collector. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	1.95Vrms at 445-1kohm
A-wtd S/N ratio	98.3dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.001% / 0.0032%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0028% / 0.0015%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.35dB to -0.85dB
Digital jitter	380psec
Resolution @ -90dB/-100dB	+3.3dB / +3.7dB
Power consumption	17W
Dimensions (WHD)	355x105x325mm



Dual CS505

If you were just taking your first steps into the world of hi-fi in the early 1980s you'd give serious consideration to the Dual CS505. Often partnered with a NAD 3020 amp by the canny hi-fi buyer on a budget, these two components started many listeners on a path that would bring countless hours of enjoyment.

In the 1960s and '70s Dual occupied a similar place in the German market to BSR and Garrard in the UK, producing turntable units for music centres and combination units. Yet it retained audiophile credibility for the quality of its separate belt-drives, which sold well across Europe.

The CS505 first appeared in 1981 as a simplified version of the already established CS506. It met with instant success and became the best selling 'proper' turntable in the UK. The CS505-1 featured a lightweight cartridge to complement the deck's famous low mass arm along with a revised

perimeter which could be ordered in a choice of two veneered finishes or black. Changes were also made to the headshell so that it could now be unscrewed from the arm.

The platter was made from pressed aluminium sheet machined to make it attractive and accurate. A thick rubber mat effectively damped the ringing that would otherwise emanate from such a lightweight metallic structure and so it looked good and ran true.

The CS505 had more than a few features of interest. Firstly, the expanding 'Vario Pulley' allowed the speed of the deck to be fine-tuned. An interlock disabled the speed selector unless the platter was turning: this prevented the belt being damaged by an inexperienced user. And whenever the arm was returned to its rest the cueing lever was automatically set to a raised position, protecting the stylus.



A PLEASING FLUENCY

Ortofon 2M cartridge fitted, the Dual slotted nicely into our reference system. We began listening with the track 'Dancing With Tears In My Eyes' by Ultravox, from the *Chrysalis* album *The Collection*. As well as

the strong and stable rhythm, the Dual revealed a fine vocal presence largely free of midrange muddle – not to mention a nice big 'walk-in' soundstage, which suggested it was working well with the cartridge.

Treble detail around the percussion was perhaps slightly veiled, but this is a minor criticism.

ABOVE: Against a sea of matt black two features strike the eye – the ultra low mass arm and the strobe rings around the aluminium platter, though there was no strobe lamp. The CS505-2 arm featured a removable headshell while previous versions had a sliding carrier released by rotating the finger grip

The musical presentation was surprisingly good.

Despite the fact that the deck's top plate is spring-mounted, we did find that careful positioning was essential otherwise acoustic feedback could affect the precision of the bass. The deck's thin plastic bottom cover and delicate arm are both sensitive structures it seems.

To see how the CS505-2 would handle more serious musical fare we tried it with the beautiful Philips recording of Beethoven's 'Für Elise'. Here the Dual demonstrated a pleasing fluency around the individual piano notes. A slightly warmer tonality might have suited the piece better but each note was solid and steady – not always a given with belt-drives.

In absolute terms one could perhaps have wanted for more clarity around the textures that give each note its own distinctive character, but then we're talking here of a deck that costs a fraction of the price of the best on the market. An impressively quiet background was another aspect of the CS505-2 which we came to appreciate. Rumble appeared to be well suppressed and hum (both mechanical and electrical) was subjectively absent.

VERDICT

Dual's evergreen budget turntable remains an excellent way to get into the gentle pastime of playing records. It remains a desirable asset, not just for those who enjoy collecting vintage components but for everyday listeners too. Well engineered, reliable and still in plentiful supply secondhand, it has lost none of its appeal. ☺

'The CS505 first appeared in 1981 and met with instant success'

counterweight. It also came with a restyled moulded plinth.

At £75 the CS505-1 was something of a bargain and perhaps the definitive version of the 505 series, but further changes were to come. The CS505-2 – the model tested here – returned to a boxy-looking plinth with a wooden

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.35rpm (+0.07%)
Time to audible stabilisation	2sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.07% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-69.5dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-69.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-67.9dB
Power Consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD)	435x140x370mm

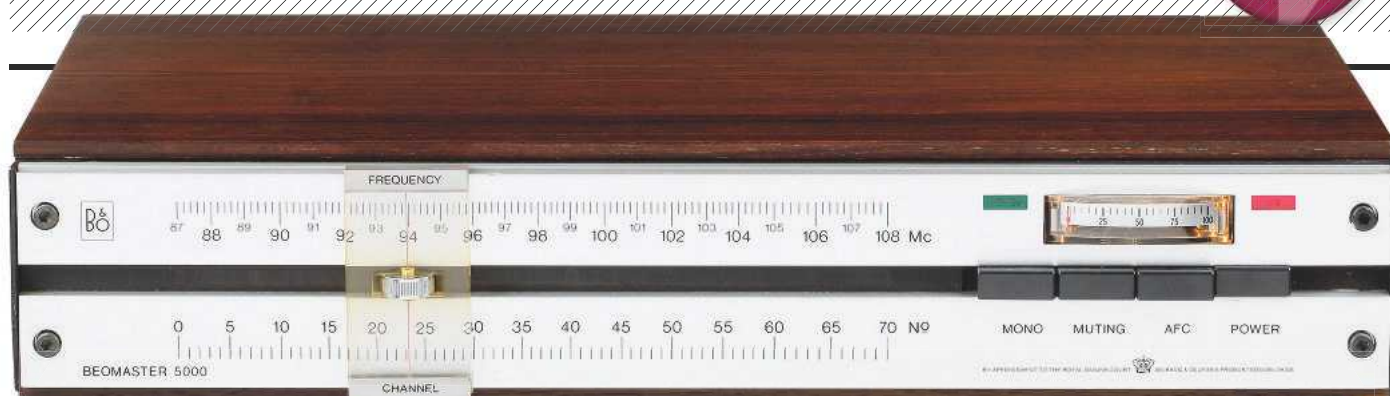


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Beomaster 5000

The Beomaster 5000 FM-only tuner was part of a system that represented Bang & Olufsen's entry into the then new field of serious hi-fi. Launched in 1967 to immediate acclaim for its radical styling – not to mention outstanding performance – the Beolab series was an instant hit.

With FM broadcasting spreading across Europe, along with the introduction of stereo encoding, a quality tuner became a desirable part of a hi-fi set-up; and the FM-only tuner was the preferred option for the serious listener.

Comparatively simple in construction the Beomaster 5000 used a four-gang mechanical tuning capacitor in the front-end unit, followed by five stages of discrete transistor intermediate frequency (IF) amplification at the standard frequency of 10.7MHz.

'The piano's resonating low notes were matched by few other tuners'

The FM stereo decoder used the off-air 19kHz pilot tone, frequency doubled to 38kHz, to drive the decoding matrix directly. In the audio sections of the Beomaster 5000 unusual care was taken to suppress the 19 and 38kHz tones that remain after the decoding process – something often ignored in other tuner designs of the day.

A hardwood cover and trim around the base was available in either teak or rosewood, while the

internal layout was exceptionally neat and tidy with a chassis braced by a diecast panel at each end. Two audio outputs were provided: one to drive an amplifier; and one for direct connection to a tape recorder at an attenuated DIN level.

Controls were provided for automatic frequency control (AFC), inter-station muting and mono reception. The user could set both the muting level and the signal strength at which the stereo decoder would cut-in using preset controls at the back of the chassis.

Most striking, however, was the tuning control. This had been styled to look like a slide-rule. Its 'cursor' was operated directly and was both pointer and control at the same time. The large illuminated meter and excellent AFC system made accurate tuning very simple, and in lieu of station markers or preset stations a numerical logging

scale was printed on the fascia, so that the locations of preferred stations could easily be noted. The Beomaster 5000 underwent technical improvements during its life-cycle, though in outward appearance it remained unchanged.



A PLEASURE TO HEAR

Once everything was up and running we slid the cursor straight to 90.3MHz for BBC Radio 3. What a treat! This is a rich-sounding tuner that seems capable of making almost any broadcast a pleasure (although it could sound slightly bass heavy in some systems). *Late Junction* sounded inviting and

ABOVE: A linear slide-rule tuning scale dominates the fascia of the Beomaster 5000 while the four cap head screws neatly evoke the rack mounts of studio gear. The rear of the Beomaster 5000 offered three aerial sockets (including one for broadcast monitoring) and two audio outputs – it was certainly well connected

opulent, even when the music verged on the challenging. An occasionally discordant piano performance was fascinating in its tonal variety, with the isolated, resonating and thudding low notes portrayed in a way matched by few other tuners of any vintage.

Meanwhile, BBC Radio 4 was presented in a manner that revealed both the warmth and the authority of the presenters' voices. If there was a niggle it was that the non-PLL stereo decoder began to show its limitations with weaker broadcasts, such as LBC 97.3.

Well made and solid-state throughout, the Beomaster 5000 represents a good secondhand buy. The main weakness appears to be that the screen-printed legends wear off the front panel, which rather defeats the object of the neat styling. Also, the selenium rectifier in the power supply becomes weakened with age, leading to stereo reception problems and background hum.

VERDICT

Here is another vintage tuner which can more than hold its own against many a modern counterpart. An aural and a visual delight, the Beomaster 5000 tuner remains as desirable now as it ever has been. ⬇

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level/Impedance	455mV (100% mod) / 2.65kohm
Muting threshold/Sensitivity (65dB SN)	13µV / see Lab Report
Distortion vs. frequency (20Hz-15kHz)	0.46 to 0.65%
Pilot/Subcarrier suppression	63dB / 72dB
Ultimate A-wtd S/N ratio (75% mod)	74.9dB
Frequency response (20Hz-15kHz)	+0.3dB to -2.9dB
Stereo separation (1kHz)	31dB
Power consumption	9W
Dimensions (WHD)	470x98x251mm

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Rogers Cadet III

A 10W design from the final years of the valve era, the original Rogers Cadet appeared in 1958 as an amplifier and control unit combination for mounting inside a cabinet. Its stereo successor, the Cadet II, appeared in 1962 and proved equally popular.

With the version III, gain was increased so that magnetic cartridges like the Shure M44 and M75 series could be used. This was achieved by the use of special ECC807 valves and an extra stage, meaning that the Cadet III control unit became slightly wider. Six cartridge matching networks were offered, each housed in a small metal can with a plug-in base.

Amplifier output was raised from six watts to ten. Since the ECL86 valves stayed the same, there was a voltage doubling circuit in the power supply. The amplifier circuit was otherwise conventional, using traditional auto-bias for the output

'Its luxurious flavour made the Cadet III especially easy to enjoy'

stages and moderate negative feedback taken from the 10-15ohm loudspeaker output to suppress distortion and flatten the response.

Control unit and amplifier were sold as a pair and were not available separately, the control unit being powered from the amplifier via an umbilical cable which also carried the L/R audio signals along with mains power to and from the on/

off switch. Later, a single-chassis version was offered with all the components mounted on one unit, although the circuit remained largely unaltered.

Setting up a system today brings with it the nuisance of non-standard connectors, in particular the screw terminals for the loudspeakers. The correct solution is to have adapters made up rather than to start drilling holes in the gear. The same applies to the inputs: the sockets are a bit too close together to use modern cables with their often bulky plugs, so short adapters may be necessary.

EASY TO ENJOY

With 10W on tap, sensitive loudspeakers are a must – forget any ideas of Rogers LS3/5As! For this review we used Monitor Audio PL100 loudspeakers and a Cyrus CD8 SE2 CD. The track 'Fascination' by Everything But The Girl [Blanco Y Negro] showed that the Cadet III is possessed of quite exceptional midrange clarity when used to play uncluttered types of music such as this. The treble is vivid and clean too, although we did feel that some of the usual sparkle was

missing from the top end of many of the recordings tried.

One real problem though was the bass, which lacked any real sense of control and would often boom and swell, obscuring musical detail present further up the register. With the Cadet III the 60Hz rumble filter proved to be a useful feature for combating bass waywardness. It does not solve the

ABOVE: A restyled aluminium fascia gave the Rogers Cadet III a more modern look as compared to the previous Cadet II model. The front DIN socket for a tape recorder was an unusual addition. RCA-type sockets at the rear were close-spaced by today's standards

problem, but at least reduces it to a more acceptable level.

Surprisingly, the Cadet III will play loudly quite easily but the sound became compressed, and lost some of its fine midrange detail, at a point somewhat short of the hard limit where rapidly increasing distortion was encountered.

All the same, the sense of scale which the Rogers could lend to Dvořák's *Slavonic Dance* in A flat, Op.72 [DG] was creditable for an amplifier of this size. Here the overly fulsome bass was less of a hindrance giving the piece a rich and luxurious flavour which made it especially easy to enjoy.

Imaging was perhaps a little blurred but the string and the brass sections of the orchestra were still easy to place in a soundstage which, while not being particularly three-dimensional, did fill the area between the loudspeakers.

Another surprise came in the form of an impressively quiet background. From our listening position the performance was marred neither by hiss nor hum: a fine result for a valve amplifier of this topology and generation. This isn't a modern sounding amplifier, its 'period' looks are matched by a 'period' sound, which is something that goes a long way to explaining why it is still popular among lovers of vintage components.

VERDICT

Despite its 10W power output and loose bass, the Cadet III is enjoyable to listen to. It can be an excellent introduction to classic valve amplification. Working examples should be plentiful at around £250, but steer clear of anything that has been greatly modified. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	7W / 9W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	7.1W / 9.4W / 8.7W / 4.2W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	1.06–2.50ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz–100kHz, 0dBW)	+2.1dB to –21.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/8W)	70mV / 200mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/8W)	64.8dB / 73.8dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1W/8ohm)	0.11–4.3%
Power consumption (Idle/rated output)	65W/75W
Dimensions (WHD, Control/Main)	298x133x279/254x102x165mm



Sony TA-1120A

The TA-1120 stereo amplifier was a step-ahead design which combined power, quality, reliability and compactness in a way that had not been seen before, but which in a few years would become ubiquitous across the ranges of Japan's major hi-fi brands.

In 1968 the original TA-1120 was replaced by the TA-1120A, as tested here, the addition of a headphone socket and the removal of a 'safety' indicator light being the only obvious external clues as to which model is which. Revisions were also made to the preamplifier circuit.

The main selector lever gives a choice of phono 1 (MM) or tuner, along with a central position that selects a rotary control giving four further options, eg, mic, tape head, second MM turntable and line-level

'With the processed works by Enya, the Sony came up trumps'

auxiliary input, which can be used to connect a CD player.

All the low-level sources were handled by a single versatile preamp stage. The characteristics of this stage were altered automatically by the selection of different negative feedback profiles: RIAA for phono 1 and phono 2, NAB for the tape head and flat for the microphone. Tape head EQ could be adjusted too.

Bypassable tone controls were also evidence of the sophistication

of the design, with bass and treble both set by rotaries. Additional switched filters at 50Hz (rumble) and 9kHz (scratch) were also fitted.

The TA-1120A sports a standard 1/4in headphone socket driven directly from the output of the preamplifier.

To obtain a claimed 50W into 8ohm Sony used an unusually high supply voltage of 93V to feed the TA-1120A's output stage, which meant the power supply needed a bulky reservoir capacitor. Since transistors are intolerant of heat and overload, a circuit was fitted that monitored the temperature of one 2SD45 in each channel and shut down the power amplifier if things got too hot. Thermal inertia meant that this arrangement could never be fully effective but AC capacitor coupling to the speakers offered some protection.



A QUIET AMP

A Cyrus CD8 SE 2 CD player was the source for the listening test. The speaker outputs comprise heavily

chromed nuts into which (slightly undersized) banana plugs can be inserted. So modern cables can be connected. Turn the volume control and nothing much happens until you get half way up the scale, at which point it does begin to operate normally.

The way the Sony rendered vocals, both male and female, struck us as being pleasingly clean and free of muddle. What's more, the amp was impressively quiet for

ABOVE: The 'A' version of the TA-1120 is identified by the inclusion of a headphone socket on its fascia. It set the aesthetic template emulated by amplifiers for the next decade. It had modular construction, with generous use of film capacitors and a specially designed mains transformer. Only the untidy internal wiring looks dated

a '60s design. Normally one would expect to hear a trace of hum and hiss between tracks or when the music is quiet, but this was not so.

With the title track of Don Henley's *The End Of The Innocence* [Geffen] the piano line which underpins the track was elevated beyond its usual prominence and came to rather dominate the rest of the proceedings. It also tended to smear the tempo of the music.

Meanwhile, the extreme treble present in the percussion on the Henley track was characteristic of another shortfall in the amp's presentation: the top end could sound slightly dirty and diffuse, lacking the crystal-clear sparkle that one has come to expect from recordings on CD. The TA-1120A is not quite as fluid as some of its elite European competition.

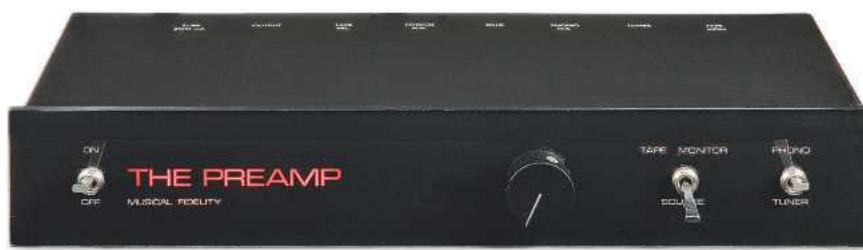
With more complex mixes, like the heavily processed works of Enya with reverb and other studio effects used liberally to give the recordings their distinctive ethereal feel, the Sony came up trumps. It made a fair fist of 'On My Way Home' from the *The Memory Of Trees* album [WEA], delivering a reasonably coherent soundstage that remained solidly located between and around the loudspeakers. On this particular occasion the lower midband warmth that had been observed previously was not such an impediment to musical enjoyment.

VERDICT

Build quality, power and strong audio performance make the Sony TA-1120A a vintage gem. Although, being slightly quirky in both sound and ergonomics, it is perhaps more an amp for the serious collector than the everyday user. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	60W / 70W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	72W / 99W / 59W / 32W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.089-0.123ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.4 to -12.1dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/50W)	42mV / 248mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/50W)	78.5dB / 94.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0025-0.37%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	27W/140W
Dimensions (WHD)	400x145x310mm



Musical Fidelity The Preamp/Dr Thomas

Anthony Michaelson's company started with one diminutive but memorable product, called simply 'The Preamp'. He started by making them on his kitchen table... What made the product so eye-catching was the acrylic front, with the product name illuminated in red.

In its original form, The Preamp had an appeal all of its own. It was so tiny, so simple, yet so businesslike. Its pleasing, instrumentation-style toggle switches gave you On/Off and select between Phono and Tuner inputs and between Monitor and Source for the tape loop. There were no 'spare' line inputs or CD input, as the preamp dates from 1982.

Moving-magnet and moving-coil input options were provided on separate sockets, but to change from one to the other you had to

'Piano had a crystalline quality stopping short of unpleasant hardness'

remove the cover to access two small switches inside.

Naturally, The Preamp needed a matching power amplifier, and this was named after its designer, Dr Martin Vincent Thomas. In its original shoebox format, with illuminated name on the fascia, the 100W+ Dr Thomas power amplifier made a nice visual match for The Preamp and it was surprisingly

powerful. But this casework design was dropped quite quickly. And when we began listening, we found the Dr Thomas input sockets too close together to accept bulkier modern phono plugs. And there was no gold plating.

THE PREAMP SCORES

Hooking things up you do have to take a little more care than with today's well-protected equipment, making sure for example you turn The Preamp on first. Otherwise, you'll get a nasty bang through the speakers. Hi-fi without a safety net!

With the redoubtable Rebecca Pidgeon and *The Raven* [Chesky SACD 329] vocals had a bright, yet still trippingly-youthful quality. Bass was good, firm and well-proportioned, the string-bass giving effective movement to the gently-rocking rhythm. Playing through the album, the Preamp/Dr T combination seemed happily able to display the way those cunningly-wrought arrangements convey such varied moods, especially the

wintery landscape that's evoked in the atmospheric title track.

There was clarity and precision, while the piano had a crystalline quality stopping short of unpleasant hardness. Substituting a Classé amp gave a clearer view of the abilities of the Preamp itself. Now the sound opened out, with a deeper, free-breathing bass, a more expansive stereo image with something

ABOVE: The Preamp controls are clean and simple, with one toggle switch to select tuner or phono, and another for tape monitor – all the sources you needed back in 1982. With matching acrylic fascia and red-lit name, the original shoebox-shaped Dr Thomas power amplifier looked smart. However, it was soon redesigned due to a number of 'mechanical problems'

more like real space around the instruments, and much better low-level detail.

With the MC input, on Argo's *The World Of The Academy* (of St Martin-in-the-Fields) and Handel's 'Entry Of The Queen Of Sheba', it was almost too much, as the ASMF's famously bright and effervescent string sound glowed a little too fiercely with the Preamp/Dr Thomas combination.

But with The Preamp feeding a modern solid-state design the merits of this little box shone through more clearly. This time the music glistened, but now without sounding too bright. There was also a good feeling of overall balance with a powerful, well-articulated bass which did a lot for the flow of the music as well as helping to make the recorded acoustic sound convincing as well as impressive.

VERDICT

These early Musical Fidelity products, and especially The Preamp, can still make music very well. But, says Antony, 'There aren't any more Dr T output transistors left, which has been the case since 1989. But all the other electronic parts are standard. The same applies to The Preamp. But, be warned, these are well past their design life and disturbing anything can have unforeseen results.' ⚡

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4/2ohm)	163W / 235W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	197W / 325W / 421W / 295W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	194ohm / 0.070–0.250ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to –0.12dB / –0.2 to –5.2dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	216mV (pre) / 130mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	97.5dB (pre) / 84.3dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0001–0.0009%/0.0009–0.025%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	4W/50W/455W
Dimensions (WHD pre/power)	305x54x130/196x110x450mm



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Spendor BC III

When the BC III was launched in 1973, Spendor's ads described it as 'An extension and refinement of the BC I and BC II', while Thomas Heinitz, doyen of hi-fi consultants in those days, could not resist using the headline 'Hey, big Spendor'.

The BC III was rooted in Spencer Hughes' work at the BBC: he was part of the legendary BBC research team, working under both D E L Shorter and H D Harwood.

It had an 8in driver with 40mm voice-coil, working in its own sealed chamber as a midrange unit while the 12in bass unit was reflex-loaded by a carefully designed port. The crossover point was 700Hz. The 12in unit was mounted on the back of the baffle, and the cutout given straight sides to provide a degree of slot loading, controlling the dispersion and hence improving

'There was a feeling of real body and purpose to snare and tom-toms'

its integration with the midrange. For the upper registers, the BC III used the Celestion HF1300 as the main high-frequency unit, with a Celestion HF2000 tweeter.

The BC III sat on a trolley stand for optimum height, which allowed them to be moved around easily, and a locking XLR connector was used instead of 4mm sockets.

One of Spendor's great strengths was stereo imaging, something that the BBC had a real requirement for. Says Philip Swift, who bought the company in 2001: 'These were the early days of FM stereo broadcasting. And it's quite wrong to assume that a narrow baffle gives you a better stereo image.'

'A wide speaker, as near as you can get to being an infinite baffle, ensures that the drive units don't "see" the edges of the baffle – and that can have a significant advantage for imaging.'

RIGHT: The trolley-mounted BC III had an inset stretched fabric grille frame. A rear XLR terminal was fitted, and the speaker weighed 34kg

'And a superficially sharpened stereo image is actually brought about by phase inconsistencies created between the main output from the driver and the diffraction effects of the cabinet. You are no longer listening to a sound where the performers are just seamlessly hanging in space as they should be.'

'The Spendor loudspeaker took account of all of these things. Even the shapes of the cutouts in the baffle were designed to minimise any interactions.'

EFFORTLESS SOUNDS

It was almost with trepidation that we set up the BC IIIs. Would these bluff-looking boxes really have the old Spendor magic we remembered? We put on *Art Pepper Meets The Rhythm Section* [Contemporary]. Pepper's sax, by itself on the left, had real presence with attack and force, while

Red Garland's piano seemed strongly characterised and well located in space. Similarly we had a strong sense of Philly Joe's drums existing as a whole kit. There was a feeling of real body and purpose to the snare and tom-tom sounds, and brushed cymbal had a fine delicacy.

With Dylan's epochal *Blood On The Tracks* [Columbia], it seemed that the big Spendors let you feel the impact of Dylan's lyrics thanks to a combination of real clarity and smoothness, keeping him right where he should be, out front.

VERDICT

With bass that's beautifully even, if neither deep nor powerful by today's standards, the BC III still sounds effortless and revealing, voices and instruments appearing believably in a natural and inviting soundstage. An enduringly well-balanced classic. ☺



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	86.4dB/87.0dB/87.2dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.7ohm @ 20kHz 65ohm @ 20Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–59° @ 802Hz 1° @ 44Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	±5.5dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	See text / 14.1kHz/14.5kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.5% / 0.4% / <0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	801x394x384mm

Shown: 3T The Mountain

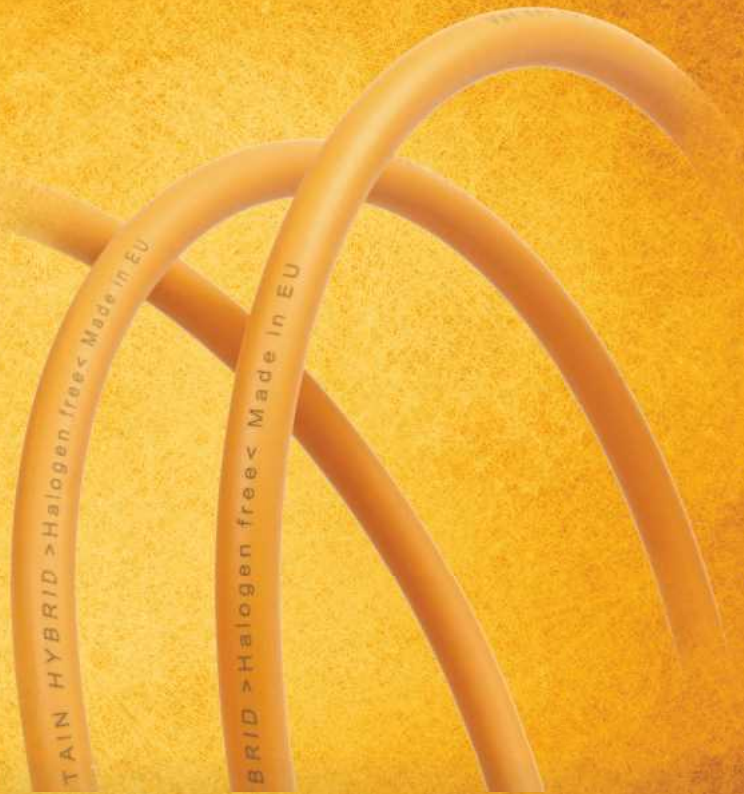
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Paul Miller Editor

Technician and writer on all things audio for some 30 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

A world without CD?

Audio formats come and go says **Paul Miller**, but the latest 'next best thing' to service true high-end music reproduction has rather crept up on us. And it's not really a format at all...

Industry pundits are always keen to anticipate, and then typically denounce, the next great hope for music reproduction in the home. Those of us of a certain age will have grown up with the vinyl LP and Compact Cassette as formats of (Hobson's) choice but the arrival of Compact Disc some 30 years ago was a paradigm shift that heralded a rash of new formats to come. Very few, if any, have truly 'stuck' – do you remember Philips' DCC (Digital Compact Cassette), the slightly more enduring Sony MiniDisc or the tragically under-supported DVD-Audio disc?

LET'S NOT GET PHYSICAL

So it's perhaps ironic that the most successful domestic digital carrier was the first, while its likely long-term successor won't be a physical carrier at all. Audio-only Blu-ray discs are the next great white hope for some, and there's some small traction for the format in its support from specialist music labels. Conventional Blu-ray discs with concert footage continue to trickle through as the hi-res music video of the day, but the attraction here must surely be the access they provide to the 'complete experience'.

Otherwise the boat has well and truly sailed for another hi-res audio disc. After all, we've still got the spiritual successor to CD in SACD, the format that refuses to finally keel over and die. Key to this format's endurance is the nature of the medium itself, the DSD (Direct Stream Digital) coding that many audiophiles prefer to the 'sound' of LPCM used by every other format.

What an audio BD disc offers is the capacity to deliver many hours' worth of high resolution digital audio. But in

'The successor to the Compact Disc won't be a physical carrier at all'

today's world that same 96kHz or 192kHz/24-bit audio content is just as likely to be available as a losslessly-packed FLAC file from one of the specialist online music vendors. The file(s) are downloaded and stored on your hard drive instead and – ironically again – possibly backed-

up on a BD storage disc, to be played out via the renderer of your choice. As a commercial operation this is certainly more attractive for the supplier than dealing with jewel cases, disc pressing, printing

inserts and shipping. Furthermore, the better media players facilitate gapless playback for an experience that mirrors or betters a conventional disc player.

THE INTERFACE IS KING

So why is this happening now? Quite simply, the burgeoning success of hi-res downloads and the rash of outboard DACs and media players that support them is down to the evolution and widespread adoption of the USB interface. Prior to this, hi-res music on Blu-ray, for example, was delivered via HDMI. This is a complex and not inexpensive video-orientated standard, factors that have always argued against its implementation by smaller, specialist hi-fi companies. Devialet, for example,



ABOVE: Sony's CDP-101, the CD player that launched the format over thirty years ago

originally adopted HDMI for its inaugural D-Premier ADH amplifier but has since replaced it with a USB 2.0 port in its new 170 model [see p59], instantly offering full, hard-wired compatibility with every audiophile's PC or Mac.

The fact that there are several very high quality off-the-shelf USB interfaces available to audio manufacturers makes their job much easier. Hard-wired Ethernet solutions are also offered off-the-peg, adding another string to the bow of designers looking to offer comprehensive media-friendly separates for the hi-fi enthusiast. We have more than a few in this issue, including the aforementioned Devialet 170, the Audio Research REF DAC [p47], Chord DSX1000 [p49], Burmester 111 [p48], T+A MP 3000 HV [p52] and dCS Vivaldi [p51].

THE FINAL IRONY

As the third and final irony in my tale, many of these media solutions also incorporate a CD drive. So even the milestone format itself has been relegated to just another legacy input, albeit one that keeps our bulging CD collections alive and kicking. But what of SACD? Well, it needs to look over its shoulder too, because the latest USB inputs also support DSD files... ☺

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Barry Fox Technology journalist

Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

Something in the air

While a disappointing 12 months for those wanting wire-free audio, Bluetooth is proving itself to be reliable and hi-fi by wi-fi could become a reality soon. **Barry Fox** looks back over 2013...

For a while, it looked as if 2013 would mark the beginning of the end for connecting wires. But as so often happens, marketing talk ran ahead of the standardisation and easy out-of-the-box experience, which is essential for commercial breakthrough. Wire-free audio is still a messy jungle of competing standards.

Although Apple iPod docks are reasonably well standardised electrically and physically, Google made the mistake of failing to specify any basic positioning requirement for the Micro USB connectors used by Android devices. The socket can be anywhere on the side or top. So docks, such as the Philips Flexi-dock, have to perform clever mechanical gymnastics to connect with any Android device.

MATURE BLUE

Radio connection by Bluetooth is now a standard feature of most portables. Bluetooth has matured and now works pretty reliably. But data speeds are slow and the audio quality of the basic Bluetooth stereo standard A2DP (Advanced Audio Distribution Profile) is sub-hi-fi.

There are better systems than A2DP, notably Kleeer and aptX, which squeeze higher quality, with lower 'latency' delays, out of the basic Bluetooth data stream. But these systems are proprietary and not part of the official Bluetooth standard. So the source and destination hardware must each have the same proprietary add-ons.

Wi-Fi offers faster data rates and higher powers, so permits higher audio quality and ranges of a 100m or so. What often isn't made clear in the sales publicity, is that most Wi-Fi connections rely on hooking into a home network,



ABOVE: Onkyo's CR-N755 CD micro – the tech is explained succinctly, but jargon is inevitable

with a wireless Access Point, Ethernet router and usually a broadband phone or cable connection to the internet. The network needs a computer to set it up and make the connection secure from hackers.

Networks have minds of their own, being happy and working one day but not the next, for no apparent reason, and sometimes getting happy and working again only after they have been 'rebooted' by switching everything off and on. They

make listening to music a technical challenge.

Meanwhile, Wi-Fi signals can be blocked by walls and doors. In theory it's possible to extend wireless range, without

laying Ethernet cables, by sending data over the house mains wiring, using pairs of Powerline connectors and extra Wi-Fi Access Points. In practice it can be deeply frustrating; the devices need to pair when they are close, before distributing them round the house. The mains-borne data can be blocked by fuse boxes, safety circuit breakers and coiled cables. Broadband can drop out when the phone rings, even with the correct filters fitted. Firewalls can block connections. The Extender Access Point usually needs to be set up via a computer.

Wi-Fi Direct, or Wireless Direct, initially called Wi-Fi P2P, cuts out the need for a network. The source and speaker make a direct 'peer-to-peer' Wi-Fi connection. Apple now licenses its easy-to-use proprietary AirPlay system. But not everyone wants to be part of the Apple and iTunes world.

Onkyo usually leads the pack on embedding new technologies, and uses Bluetooth and AirPlay, but not yet Wi-Fi Direct. Onkyo's description of what's on offer is admirably succinct, but pretty neatly sums up the jargon that enmeshes wireless music in 2013.

'Onkyo Remote App (Android OS2.1 and later) and Onkyo Remote 2 App (iOS 4.2 and later) offer wireless streaming of local content on the handset, plus control/access to the online music services built into our net-enabled audio/video receivers and the CR-N755 CD micro (Spotify Premium, last.fm. AUPEO!, Simfy, tunein radio), as well as streaming of music from NAS and PC.'

ENGINEERING CLOUT

British company Pure, and parent Imagination Technologies, kick-started the digital radio revolution with the first DAB chips and mass market DAB radios. Pure is now ploughing its considerable resources into online music services and open standard networking to rival Apple's iTunes and AirPlay.

Twenty-thirteen saw Pure finally crack the big problem of keeping left and right channels in perfect sync as they travel through an open standard network, for solid stereo imaging.

I tried the latest Pure Sensia network radio with Pure's new Jongo network speakers, but found connection by bog-standard Bluetooth far easier than by Wi-Fi. Given Pure's engineering clout and sheer determination, this will change for the better. When it does, hi-fi by Wi-Fi may finally achieve what it hasn't in 2013. ☺

'2013 saw Pure finally crack the problem of keeping left and right channels in sync'



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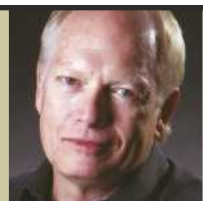


Thank you for everyone who filled room 102 at the National Audio Show in September where the Raidho D-1 speakers were magnificent.

Thank you to Raidho and also Atacama, Nordost, Audience, Quantum QRT and Bel Canto who are all famous High End Hi-Fi names, whose products helped to enhance the weekends experience.



Made from sustainable Carbonised Bamboo, designed by Dave, and made exclusively in the UK by Atacama for High End Cable, the Panda Feet will guide and support most makes of High End Hi-fi cables from ribbons, ovals and round. As well as being ECO friendly and sustainable, Bamboo is fast being acknowledged as one of the finest materials for use in Hi-fi supports as many makers are employing the medium. This is the first time this sustainable product has been specifically designed to support your High End Cables. Panda Feet provide sound footing and spacing off the floor. Lifting your cables off the floor helps to isolate the effects of vibration and the Bamboo Panda Feet can also be used under power blocks and power conditioners when there is no room on your Hi-fi rack and where the only space available is the floor. A tidy solution.



Barry Willis

Journalist for top American audio-video publications

While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

Headphone hysteria

It was the year the headphone market exploded, says **Barry Willis**, with earbud users upgrading to over-ear models and canny manufacturers cashing in. So, can the high-end companies catch up?

In late July, our local TV news featured a snippet about professional football team the San Francisco 49ers at training camp. The video clip showed players running field drills in the summer heat. Shorts and T-shirts were their only uniforms, individualised by big gaudy headphones. How they were able to hear coaches barking orders was never explained, but the implied statement about the importance of music was totally clear.

How many kids watching that snippet were impressed by the image of their heroes performing at their peak while immersed in music all of their own? You can't buy that kind of marketing exposure. It's a manufacturer's dream. Want cool with a capital 'C'? You've got to sport some really big cans.

OUT OF THE CAN

Twenty-thirteen will be remembered as the year that the headphone market exploded – an explosion that blindsided many traditional audio companies.

Adverts for headphones are everywhere. One of my free email programs has an annoying rotating banner for several varieties – some from predictable brands such as

Monster, others with catchy recently minted names like Trax or Mixr.

Late-night TV is saturated with high-style commercials for Beats by Dr Dre. A lengthy, insistent, and amusingly amateur one hypes Flips, a headphone that doubles as stereo loudspeakers. 'Solo 2 Social' reads the Flips tag-line – just turn the earcups out and you've got a full sound system. What more does any party animal need?

New brands have sprung up seemingly overnight. Chinese factories are working



ABOVE: Meg Harper of Audeze wearing a 'steampunk' headphone sculpture and a Velodyne display, showing the 'pro' vTrue and more affordable vLeve with interchangeable designer 'skins'



round the clock to fill the cavernous maw that has appeared in the previously moribund audio market. The majority of these new phones are priced from \$100 at the entry level to \$400 at the upper end.

The few that have been subjected to drive-by appraisals from expert listeners (such as me) have colorations that would never win them accolades in the high-end

press: sizzle on top, drone on the bottom, and glare through the midrange.

This is of no concern to most potential buyers, whose only prior exposure has been to dreadful-sounding

and totally disposable earbuds. By that standard, the new generation of 'phones is a huge leap forward.

The headphone explosion has also spawned unanticipated growth in associated products – headphone amplifiers, DAC/amp combos, even aftermarket cable and connector upgrades. There are many headphone enthusiast websites, and unbelievable as it may seem in the internet age, retail stores dedicated solely to headphone listening, such as 32 Ohm Audio in Portland, Oregon, an

enterprise now merged with cable/amp/accessory maker ALO Audio.

The ubiquitous little white nodules of the iPod era are passé. Signifier and lifestyle statement – especially when worn with one earcup turned out with that pretentious I've-just-stepped-out-of-the-studio-stop-bothering-me-so-I-can-get-back-to-business look – over-the-ear headphones are among today's most visible fashion accessories: big, bold, and personalised. Subwoofer stalwart Velodyne now offers a full line of 'phones, including the beautiful 'professional grade' vTrue.

ROBUST BUSINESS

Like all trends, this one will peak, but there's no predicting when. Some manufacturers are going to succeed enormously riding this wave, one that if properly managed could be a huge boon for traditional audio companies. Of course, not all headphone enthusiasts will be converted to hi-fi loonies, but a small percentage have potential.

In a world with several billion music lovers, that small percentage can be a robust business, but old-line companies may not have the conceptual flexibility. It will be fascinating to see who succeeds in audio's only emerging market. ☺

'Unbelievable as it may seem, there are stores dedicated to headphone listening'

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Jim Lesurf Science Journalist

Jim Lesurf has spent a lifetime in audio, both as an engineer at UK hi-fi company Armstrong and reader in Physics and Electronics at St Andrew's University

Mini adventures...

It was developments in open-source computer hardware that cheered **Jim Lesurf** this year as machines to run a 'vintage' operating system finally offered support for 96k/24-bit music files

When using a computer to play music, an audiophile will want the computer system to transfer audio data in the simplest and most direct way. Pass the parcel. No tampering with the contents! Alas, it can be a pain to set up most computers so that they are prevented from messing about with sound as it makes its way from the files being played to the PC's output. That's why my audio highlight of the past 12 months promises something I've wanted for decades. And if things go well, it may be a sign of future developments other audiophiles will welcome.

The tiny Raspberry Pi has had a lot of publicity. You may even have had a chance to play with, er, I mean use one. Less well known is that there is a compact, nimble, and flexible operating system that can be used with it. It is called RISC OS and it's free. One of its strengths is its simplicity.

SHOT IN THE ARM

Alongside the Raspberry Pi, other small machines have recently become available for use with RISC. And one of them, called the ARMiniX, includes 96kHz/24-bit compatible hardware.

I'm typing this column on an ARMiniX running RISC OS and have already had it playing 96kHz audio files. The system and audio software are under constant



ABOVE: The author's ARMiniX computer with lid removed; it's based on the 'PandaBoard' series of compact ARM-powered hardware. The machine in use (right), playing an 88.2kHz FLAC file



development, but while its potential has yet to be fully realised, the results are already good. Small box, low power, and mechanically quiet. The best audio cable is the shortest. The best audio replay system is the simplest and most direct.

Some readers of a certain age may recall using Acorn computers when at school. In 1998 the Acorn computer company was broken up to liberate its vastly more profitable ARM operation. ARM is now a giant in the computer chip design business. Another of Acorn's legacies was the RISC operating system.

I've used RISC OS for decades for most of my day-to-day computing. It may seem odd that someone who has worked as a professional engineer and run a successful high-tech university research group should use a system that was once best known for its use in primary schools. But this puzzlement can change to understanding once you are familiar with it. Like a good stereo system, it lets me do the job without getting in my way. OK, in recent years I've

used Linux for audio, [see *HFN* Nov '13] but it's nice to have a neat alternative.

For me, the arrival of this new hardware and the ARMiniX in particular is exciting. I've been doing tests on the

machine I bought and it sounds good. Like Linux, the system is openly developed, which means it can be improved and adapted quickly to suit specific purposes. And you

can talk to the enthusiasts developing it and get a helpful response.

'Like a good stereo system, RISC OS lets me do the job without getting in my way'

PLEASURE TO USE

Just as people have carried on playing LPs and using valve amplifiers, so the RISC OS hasn't really gone away. It may not be as widely used as it was several decades ago, but reports of its death have been exaggerated. Like good audio equipment, but unlike some computers, RISC OS can be a pleasure to use rather than a frustration. And using good equipment adds to the pleasure of the music. Life just got more interesting. ☺



ABOVE: The ARMiniX currently costs £699. For more information see www.armini.co.uk

Sometimes you just can't see the wood for the trees when you're buying hi-fi

Buying a hi-fi system is all about you and the emotional connections you make with the music. What you buy depends upon what you need and what you want from your music.

And you can only find the answer to those questions by experiencing the options available at your local expert retailer. You can't audition a hi-fi system or make comparisons between different models online, by mail order or at a department store. But at your local Clarity retailer you'll be able to take your time and relax in a dedicated listening room, listening to a variety of equipment and a variety of music. Audition and study each piece of equipment, get to know it and see how it makes you feel.

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Tim Jarman Electronics Engineer

Tim Jarman has been repairing and collecting vintage hi-fi for over 20 years. He is an authority on both classic B&O equipment and the Sony Walkman series

A vintage year

For **Tim Jarman**, 2013 was not just about the ever-growing interest in vintage hi-fi but about the way the market for classic kit has changed, discerning buyers now putting a premium on originality

Another 12 months has passed and the interest in vintage hi-fi has continued to grow. From the prices being achieved by classic kit at auction to the endless queues at audio jumbles – and even the appearance of old equipment in TV commercials – the evidence is all around.

Whether this is a reaction to the fact that computer peripherals have now replaced much mid-market hi-fi in terms of mass appeal or the turning to what is perceived as a previous 'golden age' when present times look grim is anybody's guess. But one thing's for sure: vintage hi-fi has made it out of the back pages of the *Exchange & Mart* and may soon become almost mainstream.

ORIGINALITY FIRST

As the movement has matured, its character has changed. Once, buying vintage equipment was considered to be a low cost alternative to buying new, or a way to obtain equipment that at the time was not being widely produced, such as turntables, valve amplifiers, etc. Now, the emphasis is different: vintage is a specific choice and has specific aims.

One aim is to recreate a visual, tactile and aural experience from an earlier time and this has led to a new demand among discerning buyers: originality. The classic car crowd, who are some 30 years ahead of those involved in vintage hi-fi, have long realised that the most desirable stock is that which has been the least tainted by the passage of time. Changes and alterations may well improve performance and make operation easier but they also dilute the authentic experience and erode the link to that other age. Audio is no different.

The audiophile may think it's hard enough to put together a system of contemporary components when the only aim is sound quality, but at least that only involves selecting from currently available units and accessories



ABOVE: As interest in collecting vintage hi-fi grows so prices are increasing, but while sourcing and assembling that perfect vintage system can be a challenge, the rewards are worth it...

with budget being the limiting factor. Assembling a completely authentic vintage system represents a different kind of challenge, one that only *begins* when you set about hunting down the components you've chosen.

It's at this stage you may discover that while certain parts that make up your system of choice are easy to find, those more prone to wear or premature failure have fallen by the wayside over the years. Buying a tuner or an amplifier (the more reliable sorts anyway) is easy, but what of the CD players, cassette decks and turntables that went with them? Not so straightforward, especially if you want one which can do any more than just sit there and look pretty.

It is highly probable that some vintage models are already 'extinct', but there is no way of telling and you may spend countless hours pursuing a component that no longer exists. Having said that, persistence pays off more often than not.

Loudspeakers can present considerable difficulties in themselves. Many vintage designs use synthetic foams in their construction that degrade over time irrespective of how carefully the units are used or stored. This has shocked many an



owner, who can't believe that their pride and joy is now in tatters despite only ever having been used to listen to the *Sunday Concert* on BBC Radio 3.

THE DETAILS...

Beyond this, little parts like the correct stands, head-shells, remote controls and cables can take years to find, sometimes even making it necessary to buy complete pieces of unneeded equipment

to secure them.

In the pursuit of ultimate authenticity, original brochures and catalogues are a real boon but these are not always easy to find either, having

'One thing's for sure: vintage has made it out of the back pages of Exchange & Mart'

been discarded once a component was unpacked and put to use. Luckily, many can now be found on the internet, which is usually an adequate substitute.

Is this all madness? Perhaps so, but if you are going to do something, you may as well do it properly. A completely authentic vintage system is a pleasure to appreciate and a joy to behold.

And what of sound quality? The strange thing is that once all the little details have been taken care of, that seems to look after itself. ☺

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Christopher Breunig Music Journalist

Christopher Breunig trained as an architect but became won over by music and collecting classical recordings. He was *Hi-Fi News*' Music Editor from 1986-2000

Playing a new Chord

Christopher Breunig sub-edits our hardware reviews; now he's been prompted by reading a couple of them to smash open the piggy-bank – and he's delighted with the outcome...

I seem to be following in Keith Howard's footsteps this year – or rather, picking up on two of his review recommendations, buying a DAC and a set of headphones, which have added enjoyment to my listening.

I have long been a fan of Beyerdynamic's DT-990 professional headphones, as they tend to match the sound of my Quad electrostatics – the original ESL 57s. Its other domestic models haven't impressed me, but now the T1s have arrived [see p80].

The latchable metal case is a shocking use of resources – a 3.5mm adapter would have been a darn sight more useful – but the product itself is a delight, German build quality as with Leica's. They're heavier, larger than the '990s but in fact more comfortable. And there's no microphony with the leads.

IN SHARP FOCUS

In terms of resolution they are several steps ahead of the '990s: with Trevor Pinnock's new SACD of Debussy/Mahler arrangements for a chamber group [Linn Records CDK 438] I could hear more space around the flute (*L'après-midi d'un*

RIGHT: Chord's QuteHD port shows rainbow colours to correspond with the file sampling rate: blue is for 192kHz. (The DAC looks so much nicer in black casework!)



faune), and a more pithy character; more detail in the tremolos; and the ambient setting and spatial depth was palpable. Stereo staging is excellent. The obvious downside is that recording deficiencies are equally well focused. Terrific!

The DAC that I acquired is the Chord QuteHD [*HFN* Sep '12]; it's small, neat and projects coloured lights from atop porthole indicative of the sampling rate of what's being played. My conclusion is that it offers great value for money. But I can't quite make up my mind

whether it improves the sound from my CD player (from its digital out) or just is slightly different, adding bass weight. The player is pretty well 'vintage' now: it's the 24-bit Meridian 508 but I keep it as it's so *communicative*.

Downloads on my iMac mean a long cable run to the DAC but a 5m length of Chord Cable Prodac Pro Digital coaxial works well. After the July group test I also switched to Chord's SilverPlus USB [see p95] to feed a Musical Fidelity V-Link₁₉₂, finding a marginal improvement over my former Wireworld Starlight 0.5m length.

This, of course, is Benjamin Britten's centenary year, while his *War Requiem* had a premiere in Coventry Cathedral in May 1962 and Decca's composer-conducted recording, produced by John Culshaw, was made the following January at Kingsway

Hall. It has had two digital remasterings for CD, the second accompanied by the rehearsal and control room 'eavesdroppings' which so shocked Britten when he was told about them. (Culshaw thought he'd be delighted by his subterfuge!)

BENCHMARK SET

Now Decca has gone back to try to improve its analogue editing and, for the anniversary, has issued a set

comprising a Blu-ray 24-bit/96kHz audio transfer, an 81m single-CD reissue and those fascinating production excerpts. You can also buy a licensed download from

'Britten was quite shocked to learn of the control room "eavesdroppings"'

Linn Records or highresaudio, at the companies' respective websites.

Whatever you feel about the work itself (and as a young whipper-snapper I ventured to review a Three Choirs Festival performance in 1964, duly printed in the Gloucester newspaper *The Citizen*!), there's no denying that this Decca production, engineered by Kenneth Wilkinson, set a benchmark yet to be surpassed, the one shame being that it was hard to find silent pressings of the original 2LP set, SET 252-3.

Speakers Corner ought now to oblige vinyl enthusiasts! ☺



ABOVE: Lotte Meitner-Graf's Britten portrait graced Decca's *War Requiem* LP booklet



Steve Harris Contributing Editor

Steve Harris edited *Hi-Fi News* between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

History in the making

During 2013, **Steve Harris** was struck by the number of new products that drew on audio's past. He also tells us why one industry figure reckons digital downloads are a boon for the black stuff

It's good to look back, but we must always move forward. Over the past 12 months, while delving into vintage subjects, I've enjoyed several current products that defy the passing of the decades, keeping their design heritage alive and serving as living history lessons too.

For the September 2013 issue, the editor furnished me with B&W's new CM10 speaker, and it was fascinating to see how it continued the story that started 15 years ago with the massive Nautilus 801, which was our 'Audio Milestone' in the December 2012 issue.

Back in the mid 1990s, B&W's original 801 was widely used in recording studios, but was losing out to newer, louder speakers. So B&W threw all its technical resources into a creating a flagship domestic speaker that would also tick all the boxes for modern studios.

From this flowed what has probably been the most successful high-end speaker range ever, the Nautilus 800 series. And today, with the CM10, you can get a big chunk of that Nautilus heritage for not too much money.

By then I'd also been lucky enough to sample the McIntosh MC275 Mk VI valve amp [see *HFN* Feb '13]. The original, iconic MC275 ran from 1961 to 1971, when McIntosh switched to transistors. After McIntosh was bought by car audio giant Clarion in 1990, the MC275, was

revived, mainly for the Japanese market, as the Gordon Gow Commemorative model. For the November 1993 issue of *Hi-Fi News*, this was photographed gorgeously by *HFN* staffer Tony Petch and reviewed enthusiastically by Ken Kessler.

Today, although the owners of the company are in Italy and the customers mainly in the Far East, McIntosh is still building valve amplifiers successfully in Binghamton, New York.

DELIBERATELY RETRO

Writing about the SCD-1, Sony's original flagship SACD player, I wondered that an audio format that never took off still refuses to die. The hardware may be near to extinction, yet the DSD data format lives on in the download world.

One of the few companies still making SACD players is Accuphase, but the DP-510 [see p30] isn't one of these. Instead, like most CD players these days, it faces the music of the 21st century by doubling as a DAC. But it's still a classic piece of old-school Japanese hi-fi, oozing tradition and quality.

After this I experienced another intriguing CD player, the Gato CDD-1 from Denmark [*HFN* Oct '13]. Aiming to wow potential customers with a striking design concept, this must be just about the only digital product to find uses for a mechanical analogue meter on its front panel. The needle moves round to show remaining play time, for example.

Despite this deliberately retro feature, there is also a USB input, and Gato's literature reflects the seismic shift in source priorities. When launched a couple of years back, the CDD-1 was a 'CD player with DAC' but today, Gato calls it a 'High End DAC with a Drive'.

With CD fading, will vinyl go on forever? When I asked Rega's Roy Gandy, even he



ABOVE: From 'CD player with DAC' to 'DAC with a Drive' – the Gato CDD-1 with meter

declined to predict. But he points out that if MP3 has become the yardstick for comparison, a good turntable will sound even better than it did. 'I really think the digital download situation has helped vinyl hugely,' he says.

PROVED WRONG

Touraj Moghaddam recently reminded me that when he entered the business

with Roksan back in 1985, many people thought CD was about to wipe out vinyl completely, so it was crazy to launch a brand new turntable.

And in 1990, when the late Alastair Robertson-Aikman introduced SME's first turntable, the £10k Model 30, he put in hand parts for just 100 pieces, as he believed the demand, at what was then a very high price, would be equally limited. He was pleased to be proved wrong.

And so today, as Touraj prepares to launch his no-holds-barred Vertere Reference turntable, he can be optimistic about the high-end record-player market. Whatever else happened in 2013, hi-fi marches onwards under the vinyl banner. Onwards and, it seems, upwards. ☺

'Gato's literature for its CDD-1 reflects the seismic shift in source priorities'



ABOVE: Roy Gandy of Rega Research Ltd

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MARANTZ CD6005
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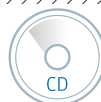
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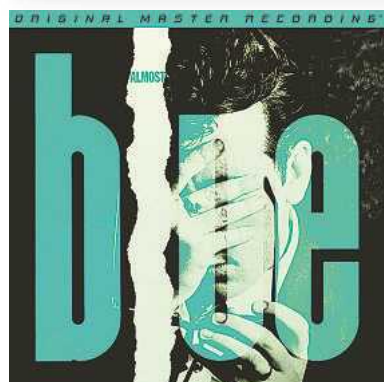
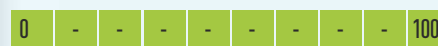


THE COMPLETE BEATLES LP BOX SET

EMI 6338091 16LPs (180g vinyl)

Any Beatles reissue invites controversy, but this – despite undeniable virtues – will forever divide listeners because the LPs were remastered from digital sources. No amount of breast-beating will alter that. What we are left with is a luxurious package that presents The Beatles' canon with a sound dissimilar to that of the original releases, period. Personal taste will be the final arbiter, and many will always defer to the originals, so this must be regarded, then, as a 'reimagining'. Attention to detail is amazing, some LPs feature bonus print material, and the accompanying 252-page hardback is simply one of the finest books ever produced about the band. [Their first album cover is shown here.] I will leave it to others to debate German vs US pressings. *KK*

Sound Quality: 93%



ELVIS COSTELLO AND THE ATTRACTIONS

Almost Blue

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-335 (180g vinyl)

Is it really 31 years ago that Costello released this demonstration of prowess beyond the Angry Young Whatever he purported to be? This exceptional set, recorded in Nashville, was a *non sequitur*, a new-waver going C&W; but then, Costello had already shown a penchant for soul and other genres not directly linked to his Stiff/pub rock/post-punk origins. Elvis and Messrs Thomas, Thomas and Nieve delivered their Londoners'-ear-view of country treasures with such conviction that they even mustered a hit with George Jones' 'Good Year For The Roses'. The LP nods to The Burritos, but the best moments are the covers of chestnuts like 'Sweet Dreams'. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



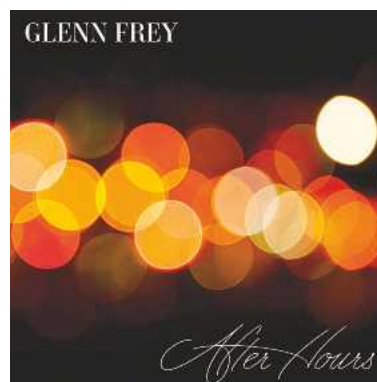
THE DOORS

The Doors

Analogue Productions APP 74007-45 (two 45rpm 180g discs)

My shelves hold nine iterations of this album: original vinyl, assorted CDs, SACDs and box sets, and an early MoFi LP. But this, despite tapes that are now 45 years old, is the most vivid and 'real'-sounding, and as a result the most sinister and chilling. Regarded by many as one of the finest debut LPs of the rock era, No. 42 in *Rolling Stone's* Top 500, it contains so many classic moments that it helps define the 1960s: 'Light My Fire', 'Break On Through' and the song that came to symbolise the Vietnam conflict, thanks to *Apocalypse Now*: 'The End'. Here it fills a full side, spinning at 45rpm – one revolution per minute to mark the album's anniversary. *KK*

Sound Quality: 94%



GLENN FREY

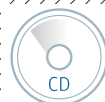
After Hours

UM/Hip-O/Music Direct 003 (180g vinyl)

This might seem a strange choice: some reviews have been lukewarm, and there's a backlash, too, against ageing rockers covering material which their parents spooned to. But it goes back to Ringo Starr over 40 years ago, followed by Bryan Ferry, Nilsson, Linda Ronstadt, Carly Simon, Jeff Lynne's dire effort – many have covered the standards, while Rod Stewart's made a (fourth) career out of it. But Frey brings something to the table that will surprise you. On 'Route 66', he sounds a bit like Chet Baker, there's more than a hint of Mel Tormé in there, and he adds some post-1960 classics, too. His 'Caroline, No', the Beach Boys classic, is simply gorgeous. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%





COMPACT DISC



SUPRAAUDIO



DVD



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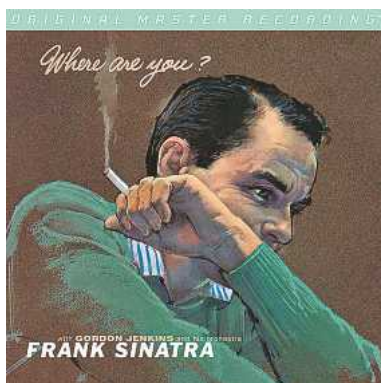
ANN PEEBLES

I Can't Stand The Rain

Pure Pleasure SHL32079 (180g vinyl)

Some performances are so transcendent that they all but define an artist's career. In Peebles' case, the title track from this 1974 LP is her 'What's Goin' On', her 'God Only Knows'. The album also includes 'I'm Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down', which is ranked almost as highly. Peebles' vocals are deceptive, almost Motown-y/girl-group-y, but the delivery counters the pop potential. This is intense, personal soul, almost overwhelming in its power, but it's also a Willie Mitchell production, and nearly as indicative of Hi Records' brand of uplifting funk as stablemate Al Green's catalogue. You want misery, go buy Leonard Cohen or Joy Division! **KK**

Sound Quality: 89%



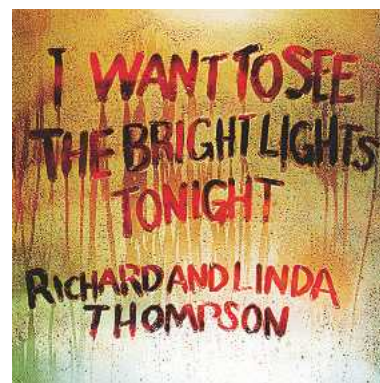
FRANK SINATRA

Where Are You?

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-406 (mono; 180g vinyl)

Here MoFi is courting controversy because they've decided to issue the long out of print mono version of what I believe was Sinatra's first stereo recording, from 1957. It will test your sensibilities if you're militantly pro-stereo and anti-mono (in precisely the same manner as the two-vs-5.1-channel contretemps), but the music is so genuinely transcendent that you will soon forget it's monophonic. Also his first without Nelson Riddle, it's an intimate affair, relaxed but mature rather than glib in the manner of fellow Rat Packer Dean Martin. The versions of 'Autumn Leaves' and 'Laura' are so subtle, deft and evocative that you might be rendered speechless. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



RICHARD & LINDA THOMPSON

I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight

Wax Cathedral Melt 002

Now regarded as a national (folk) treasure, Thompson had already carved out a career as guitarist of note with Fairport Convention by the time he delivered this, his second solo LP. Also his first LP with his then-wife Linda, who proved to be a perfect vocal companion, it was released when he was but 25. And yet it has the gravitas of a world-weary troubadour who, in places, could give Leonard Cohen a run for his misery. But, unlike the abject bleakness of a Cohen album, this has moments of elation too. Magically, the musicianship and melodies manage to respect Thompson's folk roots while demonstrating the eclecticism that has marked his career. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



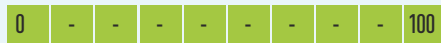
KEB' MO'

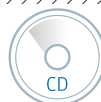
Keb' Mo'

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-357 (180g LP)

This eponymous debut from 1994 has been reissued a few times, and audiophiles having heard it at one show too many might groan at the thought of yet another, but – like Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer* – it happens for two good reasons: it is both musically and sonically exceptional. Initially only available as a CD, this was one of countless sporadic attempts at making semi-rural blues a viable, contemporary form, and it did help the genre because Keb' Mo' somehow managed to imbue this rather purist, solemn 're-boot' with the vigour of a soul man. Every track reeks of gutbucket blues, but with a thin coating of uncharacteristic urbanity. The results are magical; MoFi's LP is the best. **KK**

Sound Quality: 92%





COMPACT DISC



SUPRAAUDIO



DVD



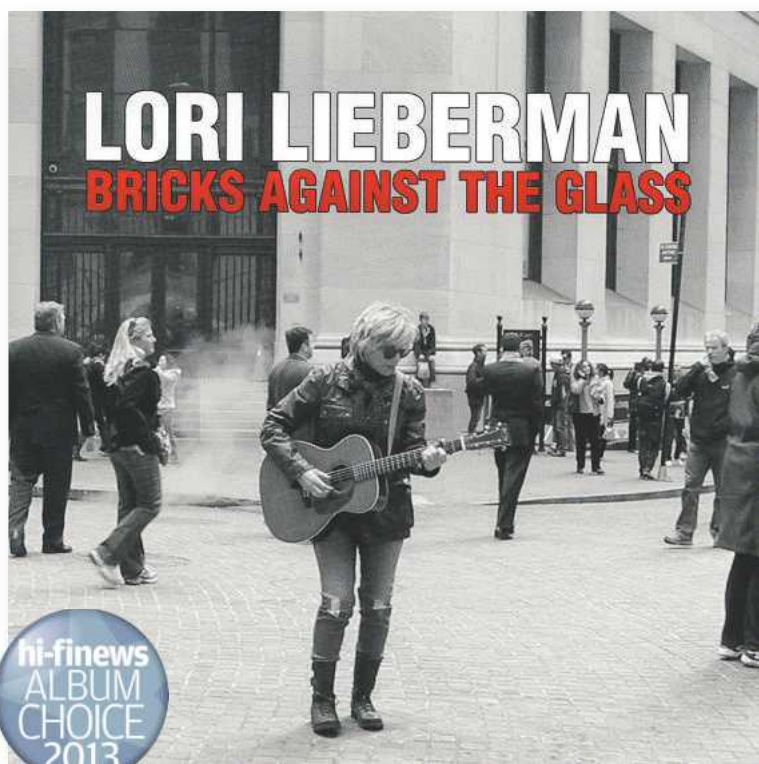
BLU-RAY



VINYL



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LORI LIEBERMAN

Bricks Against The Glass

Drive On Records 115115-11 (audiophile mastering)

That this was mastered using PMC monitors, with an audiophile at the helm, will not surprise those who know LL as a hi-fi fave. Of greater relevance is content even more personal and intimate than the sparkling arrangements might suggest. The title track, which wouldn't have seemed out of place on an early Eagles LP, promises a West Coast sonic experience but quickly moves into a circa-1968 Cambridge (Massachusetts) coffee shop confessional. 'Rise' reveals her deep love for the music of Paul Simon. 'It's Another Day' boasts the intricacy of *Rumours*-era Christine McVie. Yet all are unmistakably Lieberman, delivered in that breathy voice which lulls you into thinking she's singing only for you. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



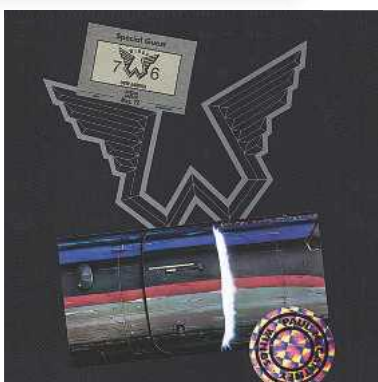
BILLY JOEL

The Stranger

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2089 (SACD)

Any disc that opens with the infectious 'Movin' Out', and that wonderful line ending in 'heart attack-ack-ack-ack-ack', rhymed with 'Hackensack' – well, sometimes you just gotta love BJ. Yes, this is achingly contrived, but no more so than the best and wittiest works by Messrs Cahn, Arlen, Porter or Hart. By this time (album No. 5) Joel was already a superstar, and he doesn't disappoint as a valid heir to the NY Jewish songwriter tradition of the previous generation. 'She's Always A Woman'? It begs a role in a 1950s melodrama. 'Just The Way You Are'? A love song to rank with 'They Can't Take That Away From Me.' I'd buy this just for that sax solo. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



PAUL MCCARTNEY & WINGS

Wings Over America

MPL/Concord Music Group HRM-3431-00 (three CDs + DVD)

Yes, it's beginning to look like every deluxe Macca reissue earns automatic 'best of...', but this deserves it as much for the package as the musical content. *WOA* was a milestone in that it was a triple LP which established Wings as a real, live touring band, while demonstrating that the ex-Beatle hadn't lost his chops. Issued in 1976, it contained a full 2hr+ concert, and presented a contemporary picture of the artist, though in retrospect it's only a so-so collection of tunes. Here it's on two CDs, CD3 comprising extra tracks from the tour, with a DVD containing a TV special. Add to this four books and loads of memorabilia, and you have a Macca must. **KK**

Sound Quality: 87%



VARIOUS

Searching For Sugar Man

Studio Canal OPTBD2480 (Blu-ray video, DTS-HD, Region B)

Of all the heartbreaking/heartwarming stories in music – like finding Howard Tate, the posthumous success of Eva Cassidy, Susan Boyle's triumph – this one is the most improbable and delightful. Anglo-Hispanic singer-songwriter records two amazing LPs in the early 1970s. Both flop in USA; they become cult LPs in South Africa. In 1997 a South African journalist and a fan find him working as a labourer in Detroit, unaware of his superstar status in South Africa. The saga has been turned into a documentary – a deserved smash hit at Sundance. If you like the idea of music that sounds like Tim Hardin-via-Don McLean, and you crave a happy ending, don't miss it. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%





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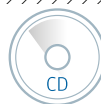
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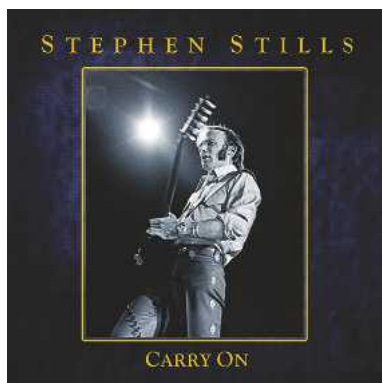
BLU-RAY



VINYL



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STEPHEN STILLS

Carry On

Atlantic/Rhino 8122796730 (four discs)

Like the similar Graham Nash retrospective, this fat box offers long-overdue recognition of one of the rock era's most talented geniuses. From the Buffalo Springfield through CSN (& Y, of course), Manassas, work with Bloomfield and Kooper, and a slew of brilliant solos, Stills has produced a monumental amount of influential work during the past half-century. We must acknowledge his role in establishing country rock, his accomplishments as a brilliant guitarist and sessions player able to leap from blues to soul to rock to folk, working with Hendrix on his first solo and putting up with Neil Young. A quarter of this is previously unreleased. *KK*

Sound Quality: 87%



THE ROLLING STONES

Charlie Is My Darling – Ireland 1965

ABKCO 3878110069 (DVD, Blu-ray, two CDs, 10in LP)

No surprise that ABKCO – which owns the early Stones catalogue – would exploit the 50th anniversary with something lavish. But instead of simply trawling the vaults, like the *Grrr!* 3CD best-of, this magnificently-packaged set contains previously unreleased live material – in spades. The video is a *cinema verité* effort preserving the group during their fiery early period, presented in stereo and 5.1 sound as a DVD and a Blu-ray, along with the soundtrack on CD and a live CD, the latter presented as well as a 10in LP. Even if the Stones mean nothing to you, I cannot think of another box that lets the curious hi-fi enthusiast sample one work in so many formats. *KK*

Sound Quality: 88%



LED ZEPPELIN

Celebration Day

Swan Song/Atlantic 8122-79710-3 (two CDs, Blu-ray + DVD)

Led Zeppelin has released an album simultaneously in an almost comical number of formats – painful if you're an underfunded completist. Amazon shows more than a dozen iterations, and Zep fans would argue that this presentation of their legendary one-off reunion gig in 2007 deserves it. This set provides the music on CD, the concert video and backstage extras, and it will make you regret missing it, letting you know it was the concert of a lifetime. Page, Plant and Jones were in top form, and Jason Bonham's dad must have been smiling down on him from heaven. Every Led Zep classic, played with vigour? It drew a tear more than once. *KK*

Sound Quality: 87%



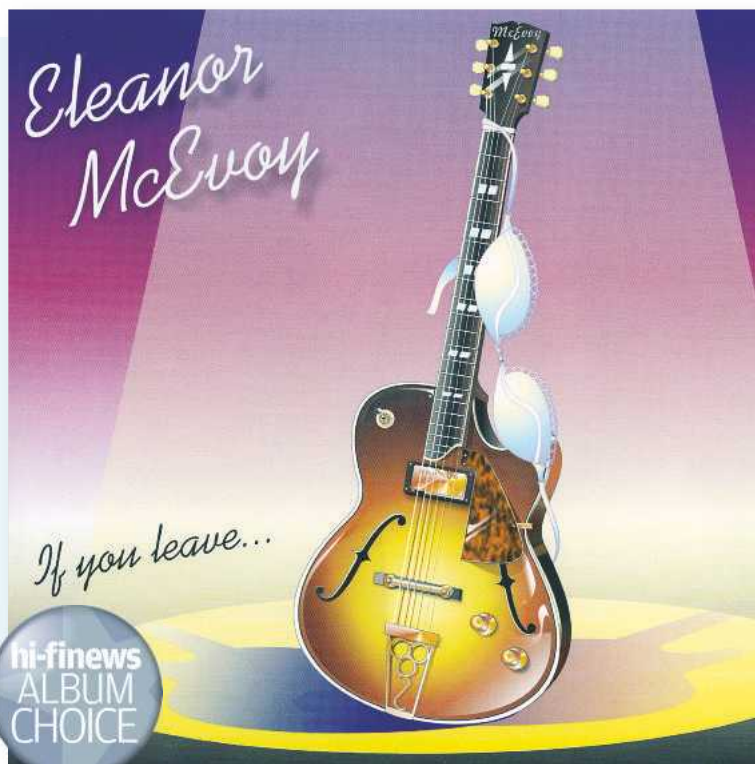
ELEANOR McEVoy

If You Leave...

Moscodic MOSCD4010

How odd it is that McEvoy remains an audiophile icon, when there has been no overt effort – à la McBroom – to make her a sonic queen. It gets down to a work ethic that must include killer sound quality as a criterion when making a new album. Jump to the delicate piano intro for track 3, her tender interpretation of Brian Wilson's 'God Only Knows': you'd think you were listening to 200g vinyl. But forget the sound. Her taste is so refined, knowing and sublime, and her delivery so rich that she can go from Lauper's 'True Colors' to 'Dust My Broom' without raising the spectre of a non-sequitur. McEvoy's original songs? As eclectic as that of one of her faves, Nick Lowe. A gem. *KK*

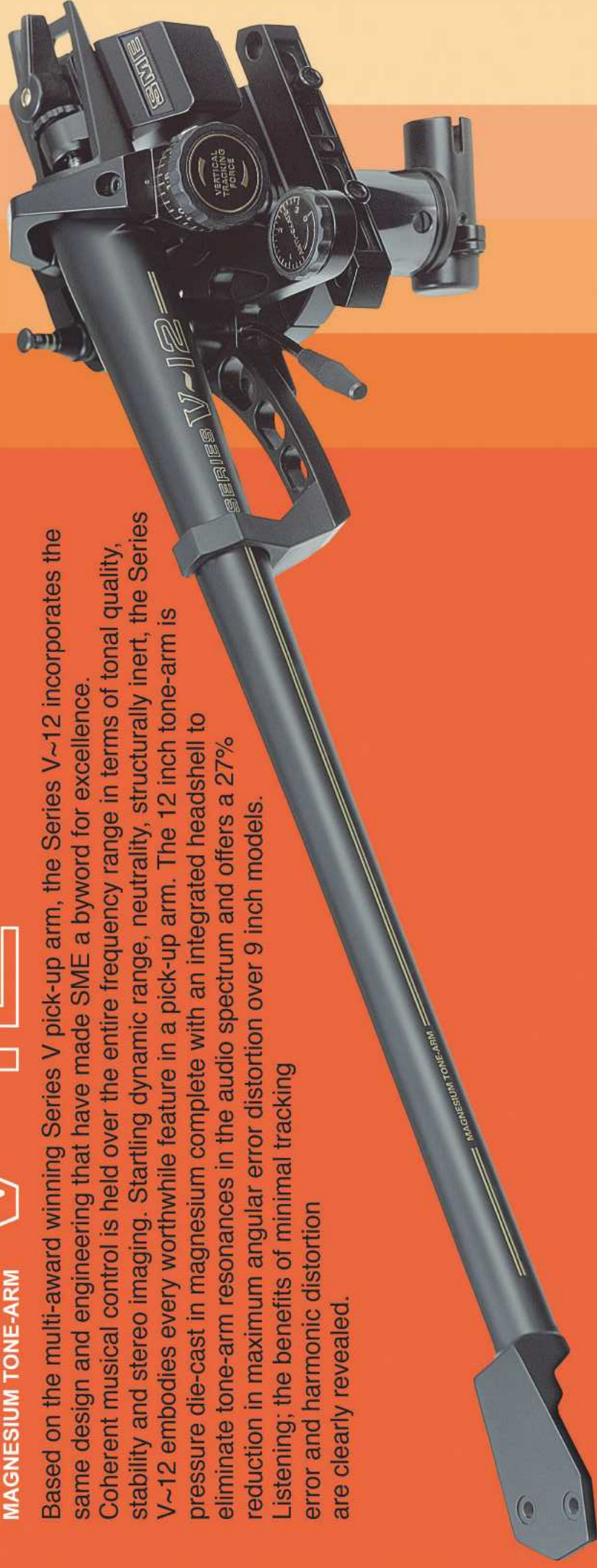
Sound Quality: 95%



SERIES V~12

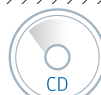
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Based on the multi-award winning Series V pick-up arm, the Series V~12 incorporates the same design and engineering that have made SME a byword for excellence. Coherent musical control is held over the entire frequency range in terms of tonal quality, stability and stereo imaging. Startling dynamic range, neutrality, structurally inert, the Series V~12 embodies every worthwhile feature in a pick-up arm. The 12 inch tone-arm is pressure die-cast in magnesium complete with an integrated headshell to eliminate tone-arm resonances in the audio spectrum and offers a 27% reduction in maximum angular error distortion over 9 inch models. Listening; the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.



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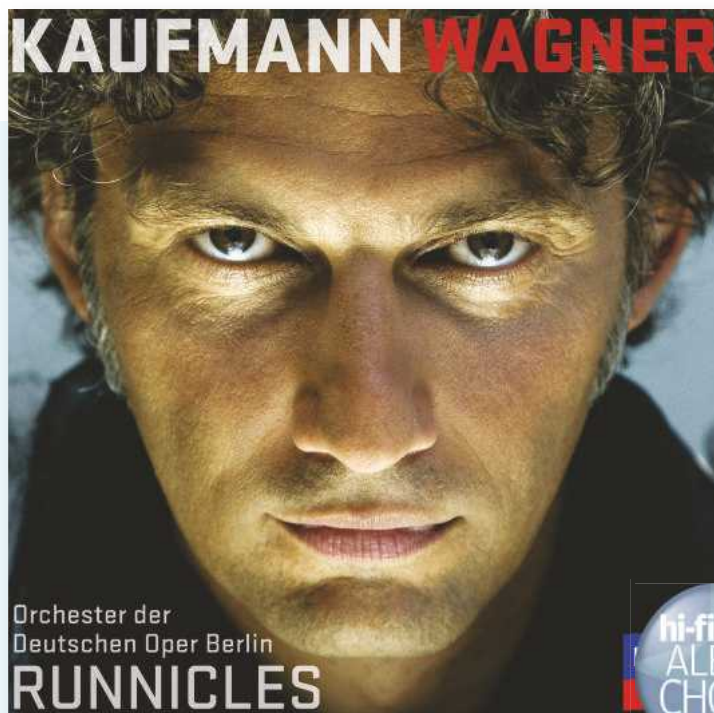
BLU-RAY



VINYL



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WAGNER

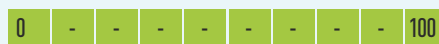
Opera excerpts, etc; Jonas Kaufmann, with Markus Brück, Deutschen Oper Orch & Ch/ Donald Runnicles (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.hiresaudio.com; Decca 478 5189

'No Wagner tenor sings with such musicianship, colour and sensitivity... he sets a standard for our time' [*Sunday Times*]. It was Kaufmann who gave the Abbado/DG *Fidelio* distinction [*HFN* Nov '11]; and the German singer's artistry at times reminds me of the young Fischer-Dieskau. Here we have excerpts from the *Ring* cycle (don't be alarmed at Siegfried's painful attempts to play the reed: track 2, 7m 44s!),

Rienzi, *Tannhäuser*, *Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin*. Then, unusually for a man (as he explains in the booklet foreword), we have the lovely *Wesendonck-Lieder*, with its *Tristan* references in 'Im Treibhaus'. Runnicles and the Berlin opera forces provide a perfect accompaniment to this often movingly reflective, often heroically ringing recital. The voice is set not too forward of the orchestra. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%



MARK KNOPFLER

Privateering (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.hiresaudio.com; Mercury Records/Universal Music

Mr Knopfler still conjures the sweetest of Stratocaster sounds as he reclines to the horizontal for most of this double-length mix of English folk and American blues. The length of the set allows a variety of songcraft, with Knopfler crooning low even when backed by blistering bottleneck blues for the juke-joint jamboree of 'Don't Forget Your Hat'. 'Rosebud Tree' might be similarly transplanted from the delta, while elsewhere there's Dire Straits Englishness for 'Corned Beef City' (echoing 'Industrial Disease') and 'Go, Love' down and dreamy (*à la* 'Brothers In Arms'). The final mixes were mastered to multiple analogue and digital formats, the three co-producers then selecting their favourite for each track. Analogue apparently won the bulk, nice for the vinyl version; the 24-bit files benefit the slower songs with shimmering detail and every Strat twang sounds crisp and clear. **JF**

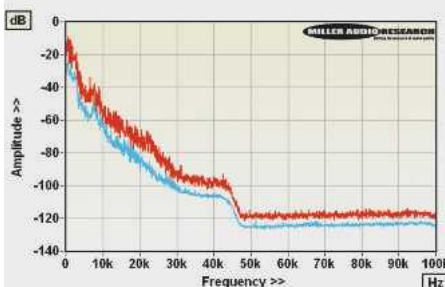
Sound Quality: 90%



OUR PROMISE

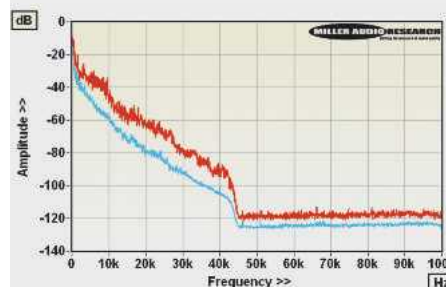
Following our Investigation feature [*HFN*, Jun '11] where we examined the claimed quality of high-resolution downloads, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* is now measuring the true sample rate and bit-depth of the HD music downloads reviewed on these pages. These unique reviews will be a regular source of information for those seeking new and re-mastered recordings offered at high sample rates and with the promise of delivering the very best sound quality. **PM**

LAB REPORT



There's about 10-15dB more 'analogue' noise here than other modern 'digital' classical offerings but the engineers have ensured Kaufmann's potent voice is always 1-2dB shy of 0dBfs at his peak. A sensitive 96kHz recording. **PM**

LAB REPORT



Analogue intervention leaves white noise well above the 24-bit resolution of this 96kHz rendering [though about 10dB 'quieter' than Krall's *Glad Rag Doll* [*HFN* Mar '13]. Louder tracks ['Corned Beef' – see Graph] peak at the digital limit. **PM**



COMPACT DISC



SUPRAAUDIO



DVD



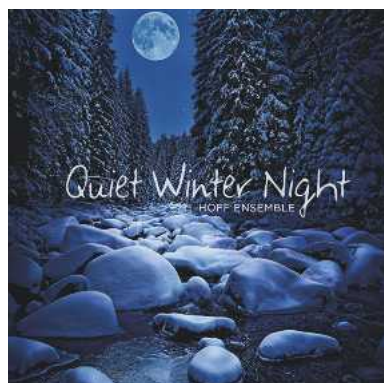
BLU-RAY



VINYL



DOWNLOAD



HOFF ENSEMBLE

Quiet Winter Night (DXD/DSD/192kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.hifiresaudio.com; 2L-087-PABD

This collective of Norwegian jazz talent is fronted by ECM stalwart multi-instrumentalist Mathias Eick, whose trumpet turns here assist in delivering an album that falls largely between labels. The bulk is based on a jazz trio, yes, but often (the opening three and the last songs in particular) overlaid with folksy fiddle and lyrical vocal parts that recall Glen Hansard's recent work with Markéta Irglová. Reminiscent also of Clannad's Celtic calm, so serenely do they float along with that lovely languor and suffering nothing for the foreign-language lyrics. Rune Arnesen's percussion delivery is a highlight – unobtrusively but dynamically captured in the wide open spaces left within arranger Jan Gunnar Hoff's presentation of the music by film composers Geir Bøhren and Bent Åserud. A BD version is available, which also includes a 5.1 mix at 24-bit/192kHz. *JF*

Sound Quality: 90%



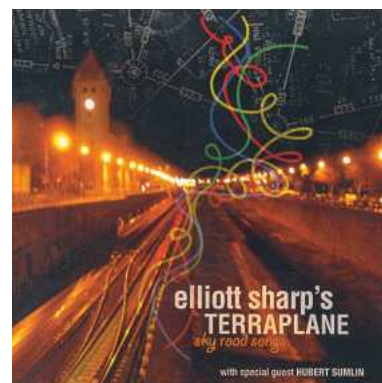
CHICAGO MOVES

Gaudete Brass (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.cedillorerecords.org; Cedille CDR 90000 136

These five players came together in 2004 to try to promote serious chamber works for brass performance, making a record debut two years later with André Previn's *Four Outings*. Six of the seven works here, all written by American composers within the last six years, were for the group and receive premiere recordings. I especially enjoyed the chattering voices of 'Spaghetti Bowl' in David Sampson's *Chicago Moves* (2011), while the following 'Loop Lament' suggests a lineage traceable from Copland. The sound is open and vivid here, with the instruments' different tonal characters distinct, open or muted, eg, track 8, from the jazz-tinged piece by Rob Deemer. (I wonder how these pieces would sound with British executants: American brass has a very different, rounded quality.) Unusual repertoire which I found stimulating and very engaging. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%



ELLIOTT SHARP'S TERRAPLANE

Sky Road Songs (88.2kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

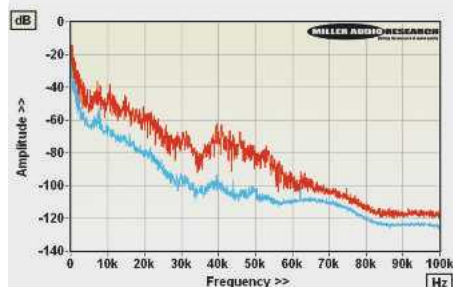
www.hifiresaudio.com; Yellowbird Records yeb-7724-2

Highly recommended in any form, but worth the HD treatment to enjoy these sonics at their best. Several tracks sit rich bottleneck guitar in a virtual alley of downtown Chicago, then surround it with electronica ('Outwards', 'Inwards') or full band ('Down On The Block'). Authenticity is assured by the inclusion of bluesman Hubert Sumlin shortly before his passing; he provides a highlight with 'Banking Blues' – a 21st century 'Taxman' – and the quality keeps coming: this is imaginative, impressively implemented and exciting new music. The magnificently-driven 'Endless Path' gets a bizarre middle eight, as does 'Dangerous Lands'; the chorus of 'The Common Extreme' comes from nowhere and goes straight back. But that's envelope-pushing – all praise to Sharp, who is clearly not entering his sixties with any thought of pipe and slippers. *JF*

Sound Quality: 90%

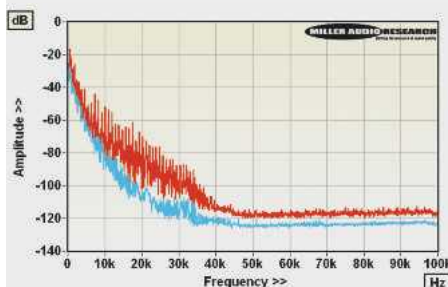


LAB REPORT



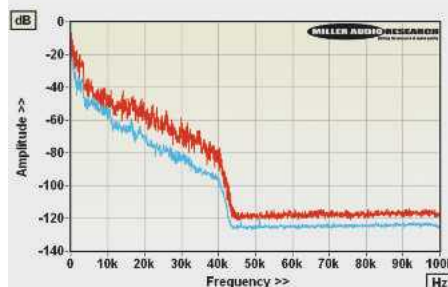
Our 24-bit/192kHz file is a downsample of the original 24-bit/384kHz DXD recording. 2L, like iTrax, can offer genuine hi-res downloads because it's in control of every stage of the recording and mastering process. Stunning! PM

LAB REPORT

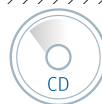


Another original 96kHz digital recording from Cedille which, typical of the label, rarely peaks above -6dBfs, making full use of the 24-bit range with no compression. Note the 'brassy' harmonics extending well beyond 20kHz. PM

LAB REPORT



Sensitively recorded – clean, dynamic, free of artifice – this ECM download enjoys a huge dynamic range although the full 40kHz+ bandwidth is only utilised when the band is in full flight, such as in 'Parting Ways', visualised above. PM



COMPACT DISC



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BLU-RAY



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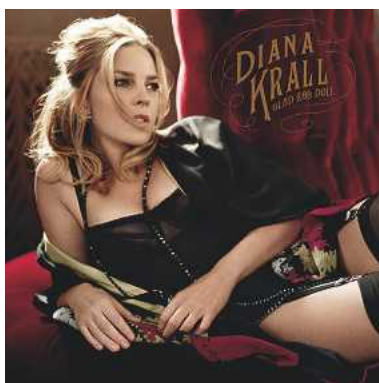
BARTÓK/HAYDN

String Quartet No. 4/String Quartet Op. 76:2;
Belenus Quartet (192kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.highresaudio.com; Acousence ACO-CD-11412

These gifted Zurich graduate string players joined forces in 2004: this is their debut recording, produced last July at the University of Arts concert-hall (the booklet PDF includes full technical details). Their musical responses are lightning-fast and in the Haydn 'Fifths' Quartet their slow movement is poised, the finale high-spirited. The great Bartók Fourth is exemplary as an abstract realisation (not unlike the Juilliards'), superbly played but with little of the ethnic colouring you hear with the Hungarian Qt [DG]. The sound is as fresh and clean as Swiss air, notwithstanding the resonance of the hall, with richness to the cello and clear decay of notes. There cannot be many 192kHz downloads of the string quartet medium so far, and this one is impressive. See and hear more at www.belenusquartett.ch. CB

Sound Quality: 90%



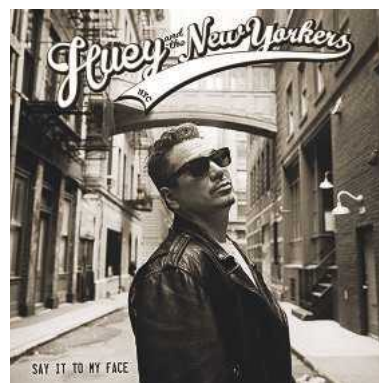
DIANA KRALL

Glad Rag Doll (96kHz/24-bit; ALAC/FLAC)

www.highresaudio.com; Verve Music Group

In presenting a collection of songs learned at her father's knee, mainly jazz 78s from the 1920s and 1930s, *Glad Rag Doll* mirrors the recent McCartney album on which Macca made significant use of Krall's talents and team. But while he played it straight, Krall has shed her usual collective in favour of T Bone Burnett behind the desk and Marc Ribot on guitar, thereby soliciting a much earthier mix of styles and sounds. This 21st-century Vaudeville show has Burnett and Ribot conjuring up cowboy guitar one moment, Waitsian tub-thumping blues the next – indeed 'There Ain't No Sweet Man' and 'I'm A Little Mixed Up' echo Ribot's early work on Waits' 'Rain Dogs'. Elsewhere Krall confirms her talents as the complete jazz package – that lightest of touch on the ivories, those gently-stepping sultry vocals and, if I may break a PC taboo, not a bad Sheila to splash across the cover either. JF

Sound Quality: 90%



HUEY AND THE NEW YORKERS

Say It To My Face (44.1kHz/24-bit; ALAC/FLAC/WAV)

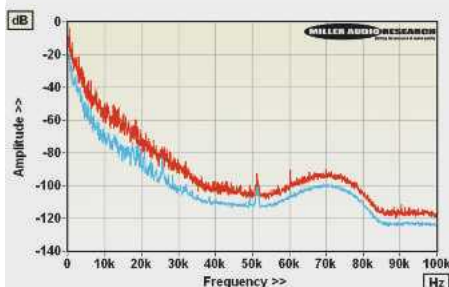
www.naimlabel.com; Naimcd180

A fine example of how rock can benefit from retention rather than wholesale flattening of dynamics, Fun Lovin' Criminals frontman, Radio 2 DJ, TV panellist, writer and former marine Huey Morgan pours his life experience into a rich album, not so much 'solo' as with a group of long-term friends ('my gang'). It's tight and well-crafted stuff, diverse too, channelling somewhere between Graham Parker and Dr Feelgood on the opener, but dropping Morgan's vocals to a Robbie Robertson growl over the bulk, whether the funk-up drive of 'Dirty Bird' (kick-arse kick drum and bass), the blissed-out 'The White Guard', the pensive country-edged 'Shaniqua' or the lonely acoustic guitar of 'She Gone'. Only occasionally does the ensemble overwhelm the snap-tight production (notably on 'New York Bluez'), and even then it overflows with the joys of music-making. JF

Sound Quality: 90%

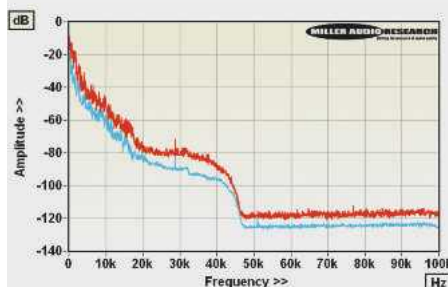


LAB REPORT



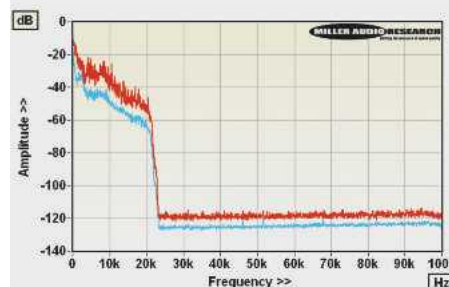
Originally recorded for CD, the native rate of this file is 192kHz and string harmonics are clear up to 32kHz. The ultrasonic 'bump' does not suggest this is an SACD downsample but the spuriae at 26kHz, 52kHz (etc) are disappointing. PM

LAB REPORT



This is evidently an analogue recording, sampled at 96kHz, but the high level of background white noise renders the 24-bit quantisation rather moot. Still, such analogue 'dithering' has been shown to exert some subjective benefit. PM

LAB REPORT



Full of energy, this 44.1kHz rendering would certainly have benefited from the extra bandwidth afforded by a 96kHz master. The difference between peak (red) and RMS (blue) spectra illustrates its adequate dynamic range. PM

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MC *Anna*



The new MC Anna from Ortofon sits at the highest echelon of Moving Coil cartridges. This state-of-the-art product is representative of numerous design elements and ideals pioneered by one of the world-leaders in analogue technologies. As a result, the MC Anna is truly capable of the highest degree of performance possible, and will provide a sound which is literally unsurpassed. The MC Anna is named after and inspired by the world-renowned operatic soprano, Anna Netrebko.

Xpression



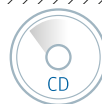
The stylish Xpression cartridge from Ortofon bridges the gap between SPU-type designs and High-End models like the MC Windfeld and MC Anna, which are designed for headshell mounting. The result is a high-performance moving coil cartridge with the convenience of a standard headshell connector. By using some of the best technologies available to them, Ortofon have made the Xpression into not just a convenient and attractive design, but also one of the finest sounding cartridges available on the market.

Cadenza Series



The Cadenza series represents another example of Ortofon's constant push toward technological perfection. By taking various design characteristics acquired through market leaders, such as the MC Jubilee and Kontrapunkt series, Ortofon have developed Cadenza to elevate any decent Hi-Fi system to a whole new level. The range consists of 5 different models, including a Mono version, but they all adhere to Ortofon's core principles of accurate information retrieval and phenomenal sound performance.

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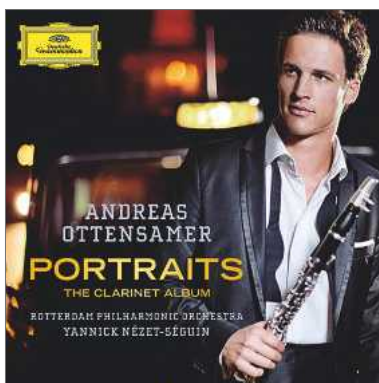
KATE BUSH

50 Words For Snow (96Hz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.hdtracks.com; EMI/Fish People FPCD007

This late-2011 material proved predictably unpredictable, the opening 'Snowflake' and 'Lake Tahoe' uncompromisingly uncommercial – soft, sparse, delicate like Sylvian, all the string overlays and synth underlays seeded from her primaeva piano parts that roll forth like a trance of prayer. Then come tracks with a more recognisable Steve Gadd on drums: structured, jazzier, in places ('Wild Man') almost alarmingly underproduced. The 24-bit version removes what was a slight veil over a previously downloaded MP3 version, while full PDF sleeve notes help make sense even of the icky duet with Elton John (rehashing Gabriel's 'Don't Give Up') and Stephen Fry's voyage through the vocabulary of the title track... mmm. Far more effective are those which simply shift with the movements of Kate's voice and piano in their evolutions of otherness and beauty. Overall, a joy. *JF*

Sound Quality: 85%



ANDREAS OTTENSAMER

Portraits: The Clarinet Album; with Rotterdam PO/ Yannick Nézet-Séguin (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.highresaudio.com; DG/Mercury 481 0131

A raucous Gershwin Prelude segues into Copland's moody Concerto then time-travels via Debussy ('La fille aux cheveux de lin') and Amy Beach (her romantic *Berceuse*) to 19th century concertos by Cimarosa and Spohr. Short transcriptions and concertos alternate, adding up to a stylistically incoherent whole but one which affords the young Austrian Andreas Ottensamer, now principal clarinetist with the Berlin Philharmonic, a chance to illustrate his captivating skills in both jazzy and classical genres. His liquid sounds, wide colour palette and sense of timing sets this version of the Copland above any competition (even the recent Michael Collins/Chandos pales) and the Rotterdam Orchestra surprises in its exuberant embrace of the two US pieces. Bold, close-mic'd sound from De Doelen concert-hall. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%



LED ZEPPELIN

Celebration Day (48kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

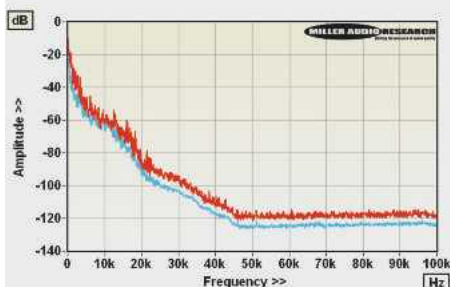
www.hdtracks.com; Rhino Atlantic/Warner Music

The 2007 reunion gig is available in many formats, here reviewed as a 24-bit/48kHz download. Glorious it sounds in simple stereo, undiluted by visual distraction (however thrilling); the sonics are rich and powerful in all the ways that the 40-years-gone 'The Song Remains The Same' wasn't. Jimmy Page is back on form, scotching fears of unrecoverable dexterity loss; Plant was always a sure hand, constricted only by his own reluctance, while young Jason Bonham outdoes himself as the anchor point for it all, just like his dear ol' Da. As for John Paul Jones, he is clearly more capable, agile and o'erflowing with invention than ever. 'Where's the bass coming from when he's on piano?' asked a friend. The answer is an octave of bass pedals under his piano, one more astounding skill from Zep's secret weapon. If this was their final show, they went out on a blinder. *JF*

Sound Quality: 85%

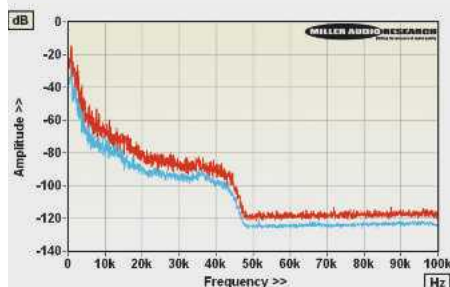


LAB REPORT



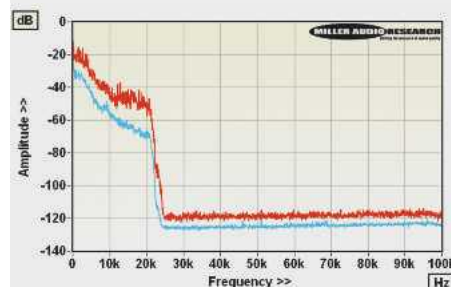
One of the more elegant tracks – 'Misty' – is illustrated above with piano extending out to 5kHz and the upper harmonics of Kate's voice dominant at 5-10kHz but clearly reaching 20kHz. Percussion, ambient/mic noise carries to ~40kHz. PM

LAB REPORT



The ultrasonic noise at 20-40kHz seen here is not tape noise but accompanies the close-miked clarinet, and is possibly distortion or noise from a downstream limiter. Otherwise this rendering looks like a native 96kHz file. PM

LAB REPORT



While the potential of its 24-bit dynamic range is rarely acknowledged, there's no escaping the raw energy of this live 48kHz recording. As 'A Whole Lotta Love' illustrates [Graph], there's content right up to ~23kHz and clean thereafter. PM



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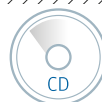
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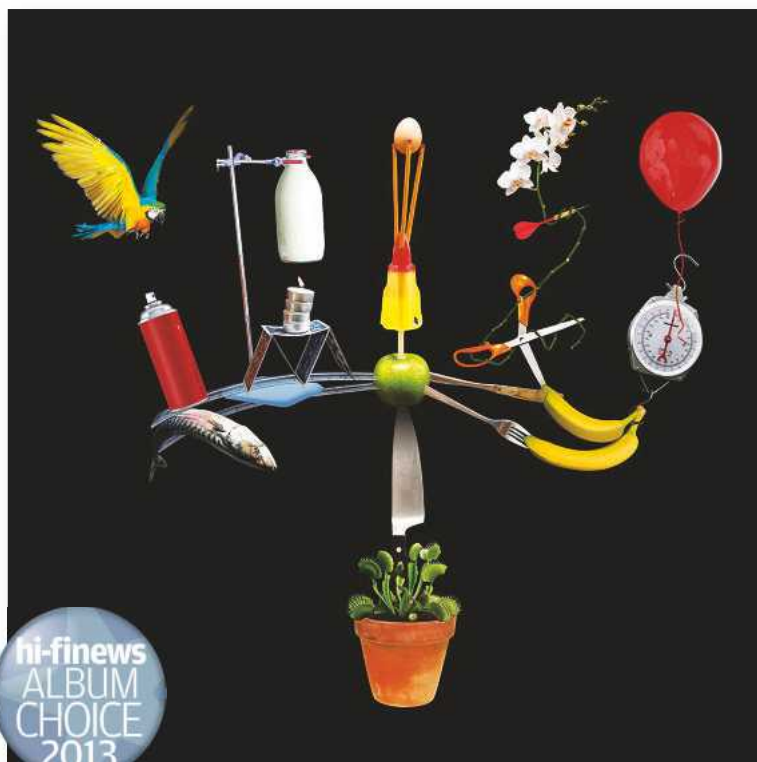
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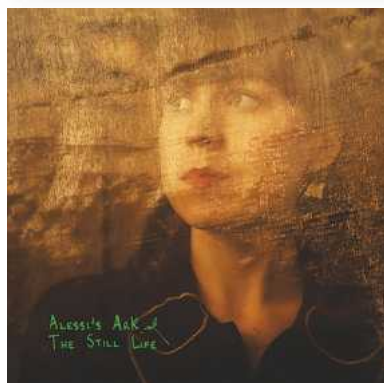
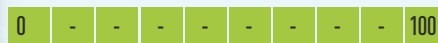
FICTION

The Big Other

Moshi Moshi MOSHICD45

This London based quintet looks set for big things. Their singles have been greeted with massive enthusiasm by the media, and this debut album confirms them as one of the smartest, tightest bands around. Produced by James Ford (Klaxons, Arctic Monkeys, Florence And The Machine) and Ash Workman (Metronomy, Summer Camp), the sound is as crisp and bright as you might expect. The music nicely blends '80s pop à la Talking Heads and China Crisis with modern rock in the preppy Afro-influenced style of Vampire Weekend. The last track, 'The Apple', about the tragic death of persecuted computer genius Alan Turing, is well worth waiting for, but there's no shortage of other impeccably crafted delights. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



ALESSI'S ARK

The Still Life

Bella Union 2532

Although she's just 22, this is the third album by London singer-songwriter Alessi Laurent-Marke. She has rightly enjoyed critical acclaim from the start, but this one pole-vaults her into another league. Largely eschewing the acoustic guitar vibe of previous releases, she has sought out a variety of new textures and ambiances in which to clothe her new songs. Recorded in just three weeks last summer in Athens (Georgia), with producer Andy LeMaster, known for his work with Bright Eyes, Azure Ray and others, *The Still Life* is rich in lyrical innocence, unpredictable melodies and chilled grooves that take a little getting used to, but are well worth the effort. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 92%



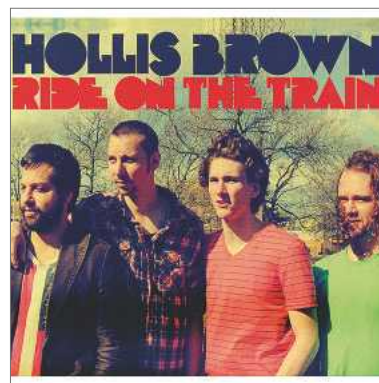
THE JON AMOR BLUES GROUP

Villa Del Vibro

Six Six Records SSR002

Jon Amor has spent a decade subtly updating his take on the blues, refining his songwriting to the point where he's now unquestionably Britain's most compelling practitioner of the genre. This album takes things one step further, offering a whole new textural sonic palette, presumably influenced by the band's imaginative second guitarist Dave Doherty. The '60s garage riffery of 'Keep It Underground' and the funk-lite groove of '40 Days Of Rain' are clearly pointing a new way forward. Indeed, the closer, 'Kings And Queens', with its sparse delay-infused guitar structure is barely blues at all, but only a fool wouldn't recognise this as a great rock album. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



HOLLIS BROWN

Ride On The Train

Alive Records ALIVE 0140-2

This New York quartet is well worth investigating. Largely because of frontman Mike Montali's microgrit sandpaper voice, they sound a lot like the wonderful Delta Spirit, but whereas that band has moved towards a more contemporary sound, this lot brandish their unreconstructed country-blues roots like a banner for good ol' boys to rally around. Produced in Nashville by the estimable Adam Landry, the album is virtually live in the studio, giving it a rare immediacy in an age of over-produced country-rock. Hollis Brown are refreshingly rough-edged and Jon Bonilla keeps his fiery guitar solos to a minimum, so the songs become the focus of attention. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 93%





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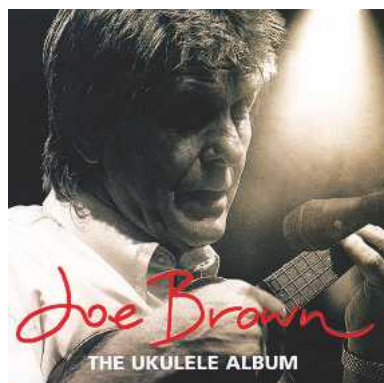
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VINYL



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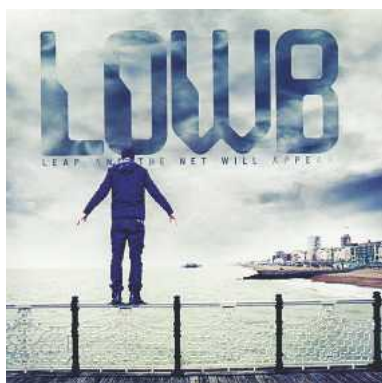
JOE BROWN

The Ukulele Album

Absolute Records UGCD 008

The ageless Joe Brown was a ukulele devotee long before massed ranks of willowy teenage girls took up the instrument and long before Eddie Vedder adopted it. It makes perfect sense that the last remaining credible British '50s rock 'n' roller should release a ukulele opus that includes heartfelt covers of everything from George Formby's 'When I'm Cleaning Windows' to The Who's 'Pinball Wizard' and Motorhead's 'Ace Of Spades'. A smile-inducing album, this is Joe Brown celebrating a wonderful little instrument with sterling assistance from the massed ukes of The International Ukulele Club Of Sonning Common – all 35 of them. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



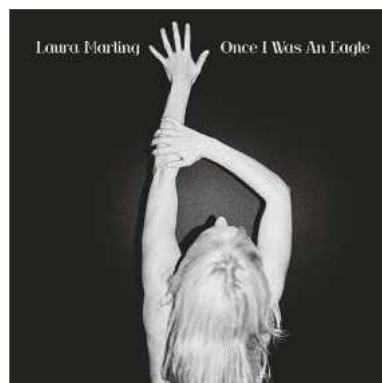
LOWB

Leap And The Net Will Appear

Distiller Records DTLBM011

Lowb is the nom-du-disque of Andy Barlow, longtime multi-instrumentalist, singer and producer of Lamb. As the architect of their unique sound, he's naturally as interested in instrumental music as he is in vocals. This, his first solo outing, offers several quietly compelling instrumentals that sit somewhere between dance and ambient techno, alongside vocal pieces with folk singer Carrie Tree, done under their joint Lunaseeds identity. There's also the mesmeric ritual chant of 'Consecration', with Jay Leighton on vocals, Everybody sounds too much like a Kraftwerk discard to be entirely satisfying, but most of the rest is splendid and a must for Lamb devotees. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



LAURA MARLING

Once I Was An Eagle

Virgin Records (tba)

On album four, Marling remains so far ahead of the competition it's as if she's in a different race entirely. Her third album was a tad more mainstream, a shade more produced than before, but this one strips everything back, suggesting it's just Marling and an acoustic guitar. Listen again, though, and you'll hear all kinds of interesting additions, such as the subtle ambient intrusions in 'Little Love Caster'. The first half of the album is a suite of songs, frequently self-referring. Then, after an instrumental interlude, you get eight stand-alone Marling gems, original, fresh and yet classic, until the last two cuts... well, that would be giving it away! *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



MENOMENA

Moms

Barsuk Records bark131

I first raved to *HFN* readers about this admittedly difficult Portland, Oregon, band back in 2010, and I'm going to do it again but, be warned, they're as awkward as ever. Despite the departure of founder-member Brent Knopf, their music has lost none of its multi-layered, sonically dense, polyrhythmic attributes, and the songs are as lyrically obtuse as ever. If Steely Dan were to jam with The Flaming Lips and then bring in George Clinton to re-mix the results, it might produce an album like this, but the curious thing is that, after a few plays, it all starts not just to make sense but to become intensely enjoyable, and if you're not careful, you'll find yourself whistling snippets of their esoteric melodies in the bath. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 93%



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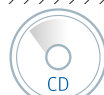
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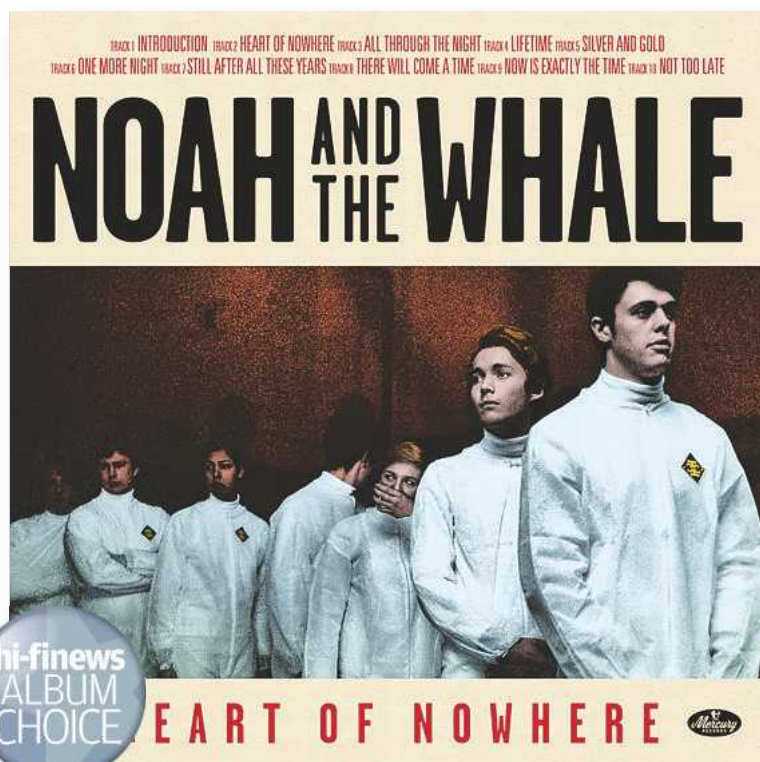
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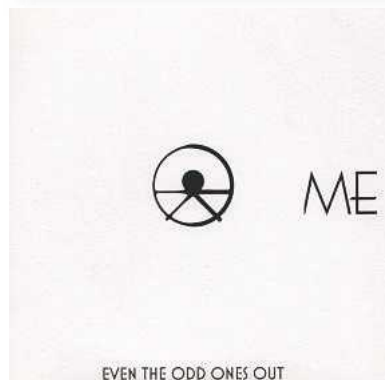
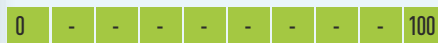
NOAH AND THE WHALE

Heart Of Nowhere

Young And Lost Club/Mercury Mercury 0107

As one who remembers Noah and Co as folksy whippersnappers with a corking debut album back in 2008 I'm delighted to see them reach their fourth opus in fine form, especially after the slight misstep of 2011's *Last Night On Earth*, a clumsy (and failed) attempt to address the American market. Leader Charlie Fink is still affecting a Transatlantic twang but now, thankfully, it's more like John Linnell of They Might Be Giants than the Tom Petty/Lou Reed clone of two years ago. Better still, their songwriting has taken a huge bound forward, so that every track here is jammed with lyrical and musical hooks that are hard to shake off. This deserves to duplicate Mumford And Sons' international success. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



ME

Even The Odd Ones Out

Lizard King Records LIZARD132P

Debut albums like this happen once in a blue moon, and I'm certainly not anticipating anything else half as pulse-poundingly riveting before the end of 2013. Me is an Aussie quartet hailed as 'glam pop metal pioneers', but that barely hints at their ability to jam ideas from every musical genre known to mankind into glorious, vibrantly celebratory pop. Their smart songs, awash with XTC-like switches of mood and time signature – plus the modern magpie suss of Panic! At The Disco – also have hints of The Kinks and Queen thrown in for good measure. As performers too they're ridiculously accomplished and, I wager, will be stadium fillers one day. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 92%



MIRACLE MILE

In Cassidy's Care

MeMe Records CDMM17

If, like me, you've stuck with Miracle Mile since they started in the mid-'90s all you need to know is that this is their new album. If not, let me tell you that these chaps – songwriter and singer Trevor Jones and multi-instrumentalist/producer Marcus Cliffe – are far and away the most unfairly unsung musical wizards ever to emerge from this sceptered isle. This latest offering is a concept album of sorts, but don't let that concern you because these are 12 stand-alone songs, big on memorable tunes wrapped around honest-to-goodness emotionally involving lyrics. The icing on the cake is that they're also sung, played and arranged impeccably. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



LINNEA OLSSON

Ah!

Gottfunk GFP001

What Olsson achieves on her solo debut with nothing but her cello, a delay pedal, her quirky voice and some evocative lyrics, is way more engaging and refreshing than anything I've heard in months. She's a Swedish cellist/songwriter who, having made a name for herself with contributions to albums by the likes of Ane Brun and Nina Kinert, is now ready to plough her own furrow. If you loved Enya in her early days, this could ring similar chimes in your head, except that Olsson is much more minimal and not even remotely celtic. Too esoteric for some perhaps, but if you like enigmatic ambient pop, cuts like 'All 4 U' and 'Dinosaur' will prove irresistible. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 92%



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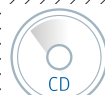
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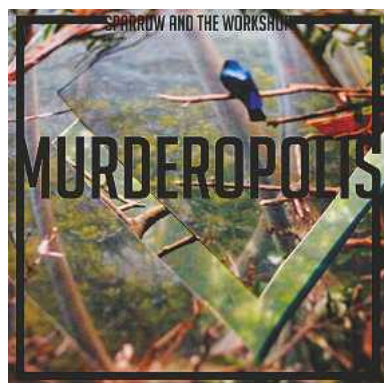
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SPARROW AND THE WORKSHOP Murderopolis

Song By Toad Records SBTRA028V

This Glasgow-based trio has been compared to bands as diverse as Jefferson Airplane, White Stripes and The Breeders but, while unashamedly drawing inspiration from folk, prog and psychedelia, their musical identity is strong enough not to need comparisons. Vocalist Jill O'Sullivan has a pure, clear voice that slices sharply through the sinister sonic landscapes they create using an array of imaginatively adapted instruments and effects pedals. When they rock-out on cuts like 'Odessa' they clearly still have power in reserve and although at times they sound ominous, at other moments they can be jazzily chilled. This band is clearly on its way somewhere fast. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 93%

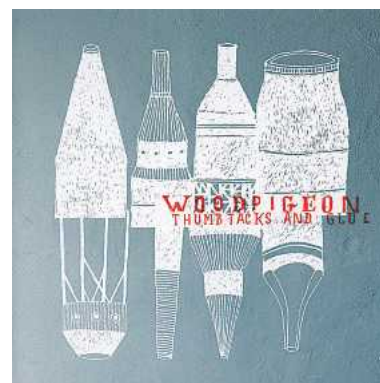


SUNDOG Insofar

Editions Penguin Cafe Ltd DPC103

Debut album by a group formed by Arthur Jeffes, son of late lamented Penguin Cafe Orchestra founder Simon Jeffes. The music is all instrumental, somewhere between chamber music and pop but rather than rejecting or slavishly copying his much-loved musical heritage, Jeffes Jr demonstrates that he has a mind of his own, delivering music that his dad would probably never have written but which fans of the PCO will immediately understand. The elegant melodic simplicity of the piano solo 'For You When It Rains' and the fiddle riffery of 'Shadows In Water' should delight anyone with a mind that's open to classical ideas as much as rock or pop. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



WOODPIGEON Thumbtacks And Glue

Fierce Panda NONG81LP

An 'independent rock collective from Calgary, Alberta', Woodpigeon enjoyed considerable acclaim for their first three albums and this one certainly deserves more of the same. When Woodpigeon rev up, as on 'Children Should Be Seen And Not Heard', they can display a visceral, primitive rock consciousness, but mostly they're operating in the sensitive singer-songwriter vein dictated by founder Mark Andrew Hamilton's delicately-wrought songs, and his fondness for clever, often classically inspired arrangements and unusual sonic textures. Those who enjoy Arcade Fire or Fleet Foxes will find much to cherish in Woodpigeon's strange little world. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



VAN DYKE PARKS

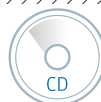
Songs Cycled

Bella Union (tba)

Nothing else on earth is quite like a Van Dyke Parks album and, given that there hasn't been one in over 20 years, this comes as a drop of honey to spread on the sourdough loaf of life. At the age of 70, Parks is still possessed of the same quirky voice I fell in love with back in 1968, not to mention his astounding wordplay and unequalled skills as an arranger. From the lurching anti-American-imperialism of 'Dreaming Of Paris', through the surreal eco-protest of 'Black Gold', the trippy calypso of 'Money Is King', the glorious *a cappella* vocals of 'The Parting Hand', the steel-band version of Saint Saens's 'Aquarium', to the orchestral variations of 'Amazing Graces', it's everything a great album should be and then some. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 94%





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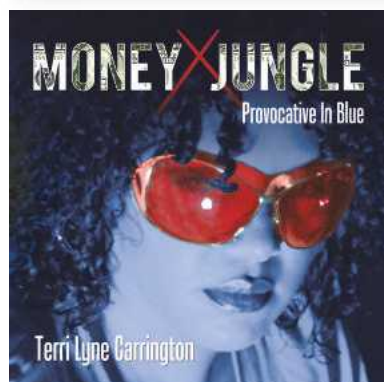
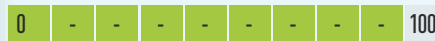
GREGORY PORTER

Liquid Spirit

Blue Note 0602537410538

This 'major label debut' for the acclaimed singer and songwriter follows two award-nominated albums on the independent New York jazz label Motema. But there's no real discontinuity here. Pianist and arranger Chip Crawford, bassist Aaron James, drummer Emanuel Harrold and alto sax player Yosuke Sato all appeared on both the previous albums, while tenor saxophonist Tivon Pennicott was heard on *Water* though not on *Be Good*. But apart from that beautiful honey-toned voice, what's important here is Porter's writing, which just goes from strength to strength. He captivates us with arresting images, phrases with a twist that make you think, deep concerns sweetened by humanity and hope. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%



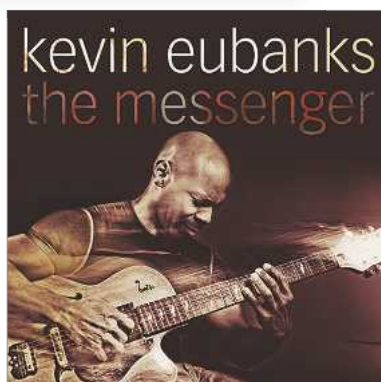
TERRI LYNE CARRINGTON

Money Jungle: Provocative In Blue

Concord Jazz CJA3402602

Drummer Terri Lyne Carrington says she was haunted for years by *Money Jungle*, by Ellington, Mingus and Roach. Her celebratory re-creation uses new material, spoken words to point up the message, and a larger group. But there is still a trio at the core. Pianist Gerald Clayton is scintillating, while bassist Christian McBride is muscular and commanding. He doesn't do Mingus's magical shimmer on 'Fleurette Africain', but this gets a new feel with guest trumpeter Clark Terry scatting. Then 'Backward Country Boy Blues' has Nir Felder's Delta-style bottleneck guitar giving way to a dreamy soul groove. And Carrington creates a thought-provoking whole. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%



KEVIN EUBANKS

The Messenger

Mack Avenue MAC1065

After leading the *Tonight Show With Jay Leno* band on television for 15 years, the ebullient master guitarist re-emerged in the jazz scene with his first Mack Avenue album, *Zen Food*, in 2010. Now, as then, he's joined here on drums by his old *Tonight* comrade Marvin 'Smitty' Smith, and on reeds by one-time Jazz Messenger and now Berklee professor Bill Pierce. There are no keyboards, but there are guest spots for elder brother Robin Eubanks on trombone and younger brother Duane on trumpet. There are plenty of fast and funky tracks where Eubanks really gets up to speed, but he shows his quieter side too: 'Loved Ones' is a guitar solo that's simply gorgeous. **SH**

Sound Quality: 85%



TIA FULLER

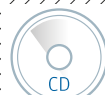
Angelic Warrior

Mack Avenue MAC 1068

Having spent five years with Beyoncé, Fuller became a music director with Esperanza Spalding's touring band. Yet she still found time to record with her own group, and her third Mack Avenue album is themed on the duality between peaceful 'angel' demeanour and 'warrior' drive. Like 2010's *Decisive Steps*, it features Tia's older sister Shamie Royston on piano, but this time joined by husband Rudy Royston on drums and Tia's long-time colleague Mimi Jones on bass. There's no trumpeter here, but instead we hear John Patitucci's agile, mellow, guitar-like piccolo bass, making a perfect match for Tia Fuller's commanding alto and soprano sax. A great album. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%





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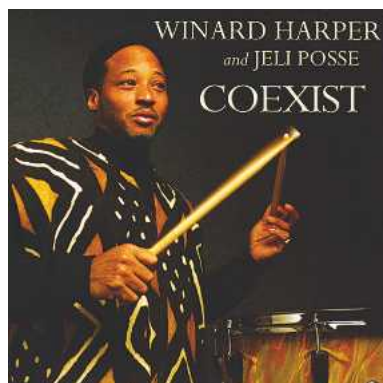
JAN GARBAREK, EGBERTO GISMONTI, CHARLIE HADEN

Magico: Carta de Amor

ECM Records ECM 278 9004 [2 CDs]

It seems ECM has laid down a cellarful of concert tapes. Here's another one, long matured and then uncorked just at the right moment, while Garbarek and Gismonti were featuring, separately, at the London Jazz Festival last November. Just over 30 years ago, *Magico* was the name of their trio, completed by the great bassist Charlie Haden, as well as being the title of one of the albums they'd made two years before this 1981 live recording. Here, at the Amerika Haus, Munich, the trio was captured at a peak of its musical rapport, while the kindly acoustic gave a warm and inviting sound. A full-bodied vintage. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



WINARD HARPER AND JELI POSSE

Coexist

Jazz Legacy Productions JLP1201018

In the long tradition of drummer/leaders, Harper can steal the show when he feels like it. Early on, he worked with artists like Dexter Gordon and Betty Carter, but he's named his current group Jeli Posse after the ancient West African storytelling and praise-singing elite also known as *griots*. It's a superb straightforward sextet with a warm and inviting sound, the opener 'Something Special' hitting a classic three-horned groove on a soul-blues theme. Tenor saxist Jovan Alexandre solos like a streamlined Trane, while trumpeter Bruce Harris and trombonist Michael Dease keep up the pace, and on other tracks their special guest is the Basie veteran Frank Wess. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE & INSIDE STRAIGHT

People Music

Mack Avenue MAC 1070

In 2009 the sought-after bassist launched his acoustic jazz project with the provocatively-titled *Kind Of Brown*. As before, the group is built around Steve Wilson's fluid saxophone and Warren Wolf's amazing vibes, with drummer Carl Allen joining McBride to form the most swinging rhythm section you could wish for. While Christian Sands contributes deftly to the uptempo 'Listen To The Heroes Cry', piano on the other pieces is provided by Peter Martin. It's a group that's gelled, mellowed and matured, with flowing, meaningful solos blending into the whole, and all with an indefinable sense of inner poise. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



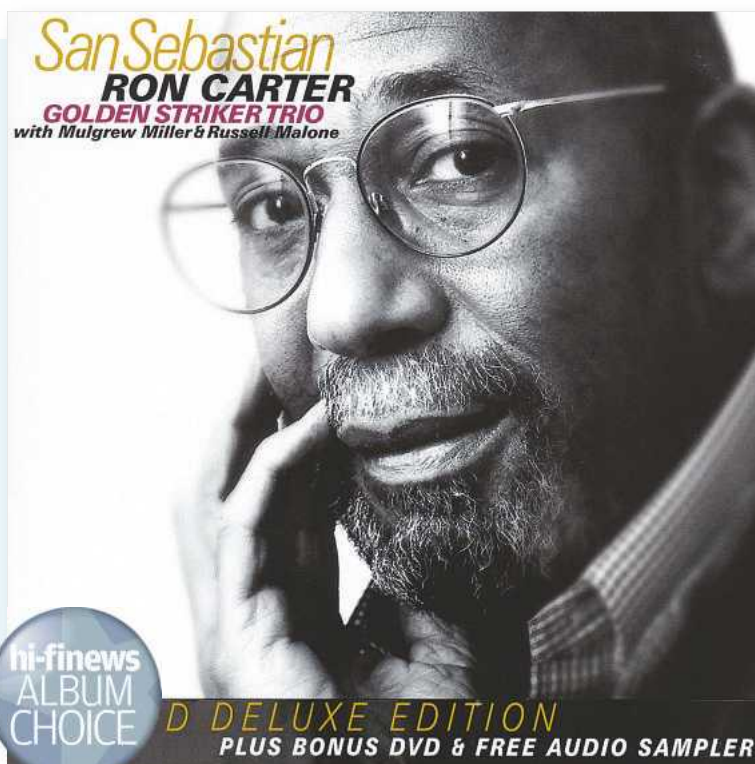
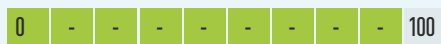
RON CARTER/GOLDEN STRIKER TRIO

San Sebastian

In+Out Records IOR CD 77103-9 (CD plus DVD)

It was in 2003 that Ron Carter recorded *The Golden Striker* for Blue Note, with pianist Mulgrew Miller and guitarist Russell Malone. The album's title, from John Lewis's composition for the MJQ, now also became a name for Carter's trio. This is a happy, relaxed concert recording from the 2010 San Sebastian jazz festival, the last night of a two-week European tour. On DVD, it's visually pretty static, with nothing special about the picture or the sound; and guitarists will be sorry that there isn't a good camera angle on Malone, his left hand hidden by his music stand. But the mastery of these great players just grows on you. You might put the CD on more often, but it is a concert worth watching too. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



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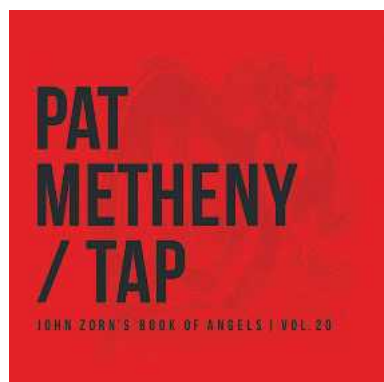
HIROMI

Move

Telarc TEL3381402

For her 2011 album *Voice*, the Japanese-born piano phenomenon teamed up with two legends of the rock world, bassist Anthony Jackson and drummer Simon Phillips. When the Trio Project went on the road, she was soon writing more music for this follow-up album, and by the time they went into the studio again, the trio was clearly reaching new heights. As before, with production and engineering by Michael Bishop, the sound is vibrant too. Hiromi's theme this time is the story of a single day and she starts by mimicking an alarm buzzer before plunging into the urgent bustle of city life. Later comes 'Escapism,' a suite with a gentle 'Fantasy' at its heart. Hiromi has outdone herself again. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%



PAT METHENY

Tap: The Book of Angels, Vol 20

Nonesuch and Tzadik 7559 795 875

After 2010's *Orchestration*, it comes as almost no surprise to find that Metheny played all of the instruments here apart from the drums, which are the work of Antonio Sanchez. The music comes from the second phase of John Zorn's epic songbook project *Masada*. After corresponding with Zorn, Metheny chose some of the yet-unrecorded *Book Of Angels* tunes from *Masada Book Two*. In the breaks of his tour schedule, he recorded them one by one in his home studio. There are guitars, sitar, brass, keyboards and more overlaid in profusion, though you can still get a shock at the sound of the naked piano in the final piece, 'Hurmiz'. Astonishing. **SH**

Sound Quality: 85%



MARIUS NESET

Birds

Edition records EDN1040

Launched just as Edition Records celebrates its fifth birthday, this is a triumphant new showcase for the brilliant Norwegian saxophonist, who burst on to the scene with *Golden Xplosion* in 2011. Here he's fronting a quintet including Jasper Hoiby, Ivo Neame and Anton Eger (who are of course Phronesis) plus Jim Hart on vibes. But the scoring calls for an additional five-piece horn section, with further colours added by Bjarke Mogensen's folksy accordion and some fabulous flute from Marius's sister Ingrid. For *Birds*, Neset has composed 11 pieces that gel as a coherent extended work, and with his boundless energy and soaring imagination really take flight. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%



COURTNEY PINE

House Of legends

Destin-E World Records 77721028867

In *Europa* Pine plumbed the depths of his bass clarinet as he explored the musical roots that spread from Africa northwards. This time, by contrast, he's exuberant on soprano sax, in a celebration of Caribbean music that embraces Calypso, Ska and Reggae. There are fabulous contributions from steel pan master Annise Hadeed, pianist Mario Canonge and fleet-fingered guitarist Cameron Pierre, and you get some classic trombone work from Kevin Edwards. There's a serious agenda behind *Legends*, which opens with a beautiful elegy for Stephen Lawrence, but in the end this is a joyful, dancing album which feels like a happy homecoming. **SH**

Sound Quality: 85%



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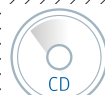
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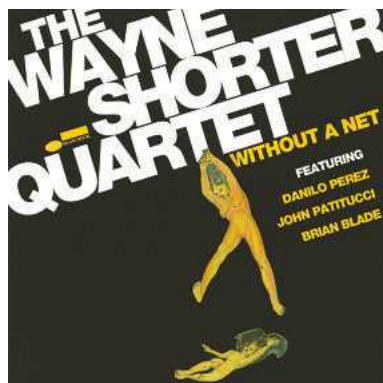


THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL JAZZ ORCHESTRA In The Spirit Of Duke

Spartacus STS 017

Here is a satisfying distillation from the SNJO's triumphant concert series of Oct '12, meticulously yet joyfully re-creating the music of Ellington. This was a long-cherished project for its director, Tommy Smith, who'd been inspired by working in the Ellington Legacy Orchestra in 1999. Smith wanted to give audiences something that was 'as close to the Ellington experience as possible', so he avoided using on-stage monitors or amplification. The resulting natural sound complements the authenticity of the playing and lets you appreciate the fabulous musicianship of all concerned. A great achievement. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%

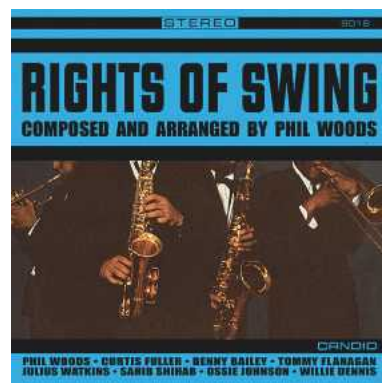


THE WAYNE SHORTER QUARTET Without A Net

Blue Note 509999 79516 2 9

It was back in 1959 that a 26-year old Wayne Shorter first recorded for Blue Note with Art Blakey. He continued to record his own albums for the label until 1970, though he'd also become a key member and the main composer of Miles Davis's 'second great quintet'. But *Without A Net* is his first Blue Note album as leader in 43 years. Recorded live on tour in 2011, it captures the same brilliant quartet, heard on the Verve recordings of the early 2000s, that Shorter has led for a dozen years now, while there's also an extended work with The Imani Winds. Shorter was 80 in August, but he's a still an absolutely commanding figure, producing stunning music. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



PHIL WOODS Rights Of Swing

Candid Stereo 9016/Pure Pleasure (180g vinyl)

Today, Phil Woods is still writing music and leading his own quintet, but back in 1961 he was the star alto sax soloist with the Quincy Jones big band. Having picked a truly stellar octet mainly from its ranks, Woods led this memorable recording of his own music. Though inspired by Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, this isn't any sort of crossover music but an original five-movement jazz suite with great ensemble writing, and many fine solos from players at the peak of their powers. A culmination rather than a look ahead, it's an illuminating piece of jazz history, and Pure Pleasure's remastering makes it glow. As Woods said in the original liner notes, 'Just listen'. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



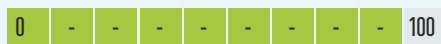
JOE LOVANO US FIVE

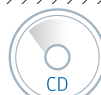
Cross Culture

Blue Note 509996 38761 2 3

For his outstanding *Us Five* quintet, first heard on *Folk Art* in 2009, Lovano brought in two drummers, Otis Brown III and Francisco Mela, to join stalwart pianist James Weidman and soon-to-be-stellar bassist Esperanza Spalding. Now, because of the demands of her schedule, Lovano has drafted in Peter Slavov, who plays on more than half the tracks here. You hear the two duetting on one track as *Us Five* becomes a sextet with two bassists and two drummers. A sixth player on six other tracks is guest guitarist Lionel Loueke, brilliantly counterpointing Lovano's various saxes even if he never sounds like an integral part of this intensely focused group. And Lovano's own playing is more vital and forceful than ever. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%





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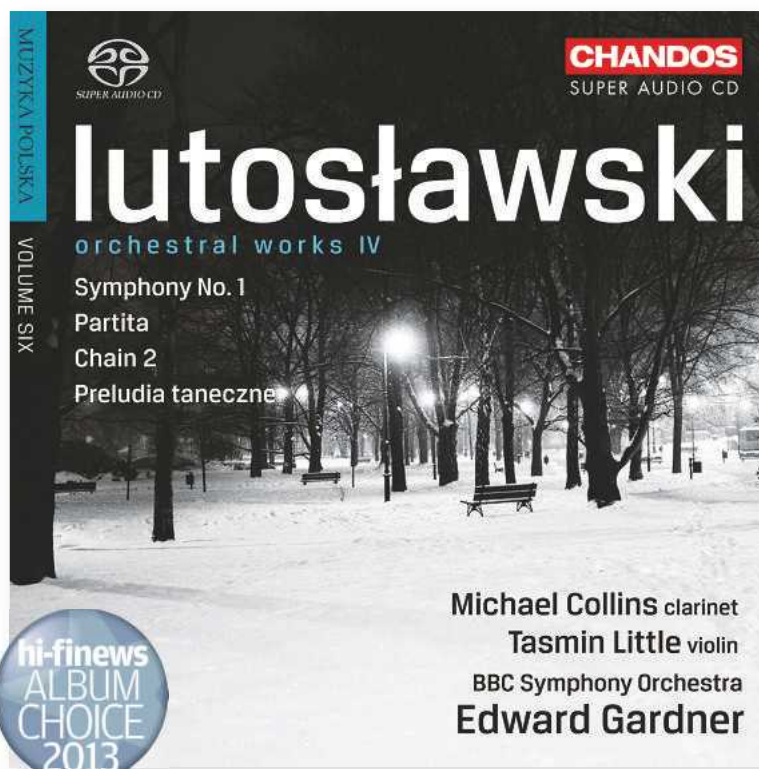
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LUTOSŁAWSKI

Cello Concerto; Symphony 2; Grave; Mala Suite (Vol.3)
Symphony 1; Partita; Chain 2; Preludia taneczne (Vol.4)
Paul Watkins, Michael Collins, Tasmin Little, BBC Symphony
Orchestra/Edward Gardner

Chandos CHSA 5106 and 5108 (hybrid SACDs; available separately)

I'm cheating slightly, unable to choose between these two SACDs but the importance of this series cannot be over-stressed. The Cello Concerto impresses me as the 'standout' item, notwithstanding composer-conducted CDs including one with Rostropovich. And to *Chain 2* and *Partita*, Tasmin Little brings softer playing and greater eloquence than Anne-Sophie Mutter (more aggressively balanced on DG) for whom the pieces were written. The early First Symphony is readily accessible, while Gardner's conducting is remarkable throughout. Watford Colosseum was the venue. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%



JS BACH

The Well-Tempered Clavier (Books 1 and 2)
András Schiff

ECM 476 4827 (four discs)

András Schiff recorded the 48 Preludes and Fugues for Decca in the 1980s: part of an extensive Bach series using a modern concert grand (in the wake of Edwin Fischer's 1930s sets and like several Schiff contemporaries). Schiff says he hopes these re-recordings, made in 2011 in a Lugano studio, are without what he sees as sentimental traces before – and you might think the opening Prelude in C is too extreme in objectivity. Another explanation he offers is that he sees a colour progression from pure white to black (the B minor). He plays his Steinway without use of the sustaining pedal. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%



BEETHOVEN

Violin Sonatas
Leonidas Kavakos/Enrico Pace

Decca 478 3523 (three discs)

Since his 1990 debut in Sibelius (including the original version of the Violin Concerto) Leonidas Kavakos has completed a rather modest discography – it includes an outstanding Mozart concerto cycle on Sony. He is now signed to Universal. Here he is partnered by an Italian pianist, his exact contemporary. Their Beethoven reflects such balanced artistry (as with Decca's mid-'70s Perlman/Ashkenazy cycle, or DG's with Kremer/Argerich) you hardly know whether to concentrate on piano or violin! There are many insights: for example, I'd never realised before how alike are the Op.96 sonata and the 'Archduke' Trio. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



FAURÉ

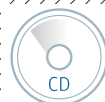
Requiem
Tenebrae, LSO Chamber Ensemble/Nigel Short

LSO Live LSO0728 (SACD hybrid)

This intimately scaled Fauré *Requiem* comes from St Giles', Cripplegate, with its clear, complementary acoustic and fine organ. The 'stand-out track' is surely the *Pie Jesu* with soprano Grace Davidson – it will be hard to return to 'starrier', bigger versions under such as Giulini, Cluytens, Barenboim, after hearing this. The *Requiem* is prefaced by another D-minor masterpiece, Bach's Partita for solo violin, in a spacious account by Gordan Nikolitch interspersed with four Chorales and the *Ciaconna* in the edition by Helga Thoenen, which has added voice parts. Her annotations are part of the lavish accompanying booklet. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%





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MAHLER

Symphony 5
Köln RSO/Hans Rosbaud

ICA Classics ICAC 5091 (mono)

The Austrian Hans Rosbaud worked mostly with German radio orchestras, where ample preparation time allowed new music to be performed. This Mahler 5 dates from 1951, at which time only the Bruno Walter 78s existed. Rosbaud's performance has transparency in terms of both interpretation and balance: no strand of orchestration gets submerged. It's especially gripping in the outer movements – terrors unleashed in (i), the rondo finale unstoppable – while the *Adagietto* is expressive in a pure way but never mawkish. Rosbaud shows too how the Fifth fits perfectly with its neighbouring *Wunderhorn* Fourth and 'Tragic' Sixth. **CB**

Sound Quality: 85%



MENDELSSOHN

Violin Concertos 1 and 2; Overture 'The Hebrides'
Alina Ibragimova, OAE/Vladimir Jurovski

Hyperion CDA67795; up to 24-bit/96kHz download

Yehudi Menuhin unearthed Mendelssohn's D-minor Concerto (composed when he was 13) in 1951, retaining performance rights and making three recordings. Alina Ibragimova, a former pupil at the Menuhin School, played it at his memorial concert. The finale is especially attractive, prompting Hyperion to offer it as a free download track. But the E-minor is beautifully done too, with a sweet violin sound, really soft *pianissimi*, and clean accompaniment by the OAE. The *Hebrides* Overture comes between the two concertos and, if less than usually stormy, has that fine lucidity which seems to be Jurovski's trademark. **CB**

Sound Quality: 85%



MOZART

Piano Concertos in B flat, K595; in D minor, K466
Maria João Pires, Orchestra Mozart/Claudio Abbado

DG 479 0075

It's more than 30 years since Maria Pires first recorded these two concertos for Erato. Her rapport with Claudio Abbado seems stronger than ever (there are earlier DG Mozart couplings with the COE and VPO). Indeed I have heard no other version of K595(j) with such accord in timing and expression. She does, for my taste, add too much personal decoration in the slow movement, although making it sound spontaneous. (The Curzon/ECO/Britten remains the model of discretion.) K466 is no less fine – the cadenzas are Beethoven's. We get DG's characteristic 'house sound' too: think back to Kempff in K595. **CB**

Sound Quality: 85%



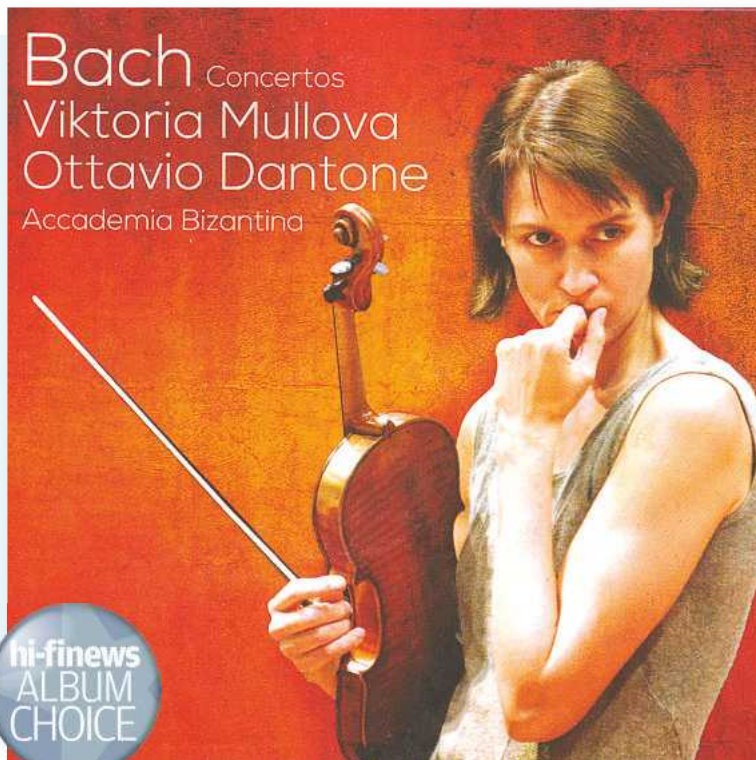
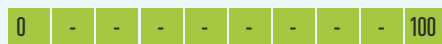
JS BACH

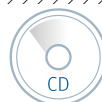
Violin Concertos BWV1041-1042, 1053 and 1060
Viktoria Mullova, Accademia Bizantina/Ottavio Dantone

Onyx ONYX 4114

In top form, and throwing aside any traces of the cool distancing for which she is sometimes criticised, Viktoria Mullova couples two of Bach's violin concertos with transcribed versions of the C minor work for two harpsichords (BWV1060) and the Harpsichord Concerto in E (BWV1053). Sessions took place last December in Ravenna. The CD comes hard on the heels of an excellent Freiburg Baroque/Harmonia Mundi disc with BWV1041-43: a different musical approach with perhaps longer phrasing but far heavier – as opposed to the sprightly and imaginatively phrased accompaniments with Dantone (his silvery continuo a delight). Highly individual! **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%





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BRAHMS

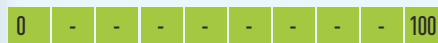
Piano works (Vol.2)

Barry Douglas

Chandos CHAN 10757 downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution

As with Vol.1 [HFN Jul '12, p82] Barry Douglas prefaces one of the major piano works – here the Sonata No.3 in F – with shorter pieces drawn from early and late Brahms: three *Ballades* Opp.10/118, three *Intermezzi* Opp.116/117 and the *Rhapsody* Op.119:4. He does have, like Kempff on one of his more focused recording days, the ability to appear rapt in the music, as if playing principally for his own pleasure (as indeed his booklet note implies). In this intimate way the overall shapes of the pieces are clear as are the shifting moods within them. The Steinway piano sound has a corresponding lean honesty, as recorded in a Cambridge hall last September. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%



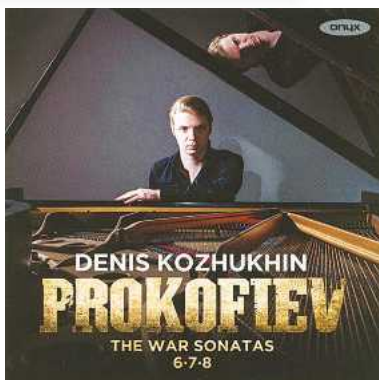
MOZART/R STRAUSS

Sinfonia Concertante, K297b/Also sprach Zarathustra
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan

Testament SBT 1474

Karajan seems to be enjoying himself in this August 1970 Salzburg Festival concert – with four wind principals in the Mozart, Koch, Leister, Seifert and Piesch, none of them participants in the EMI recording made at St Moritz a few months later (a more 'safe' affair altogether). In the Strauss Karajan is able to show off his superlative orchestra, drawing together the various sections of this over-the-top Nietzschean farrago; and the ORF engineers cope well – the clangorous 'Midnight' bells, for example. One of Testament's very best Karajan live recordings; extremely thorough booklet notes too. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



PROKOFIEV

Piano Sonatas 6-8

Denis Kozhukhin

Onyx ONYK 4111

Not a nice man (as the recent book about his wife Lina makes clear) but a clever composer, Prokofiev wrote these sonatas between 1940 and 1944 – hence their yoking as a 'War' trilogy – dedicating the Eighth to his young mistress. Written largely, one feels, to display his own technique they are mostly percussive, dissonant, yet with effective contrasts in tension: eg, the Sixth's *Allegretto*. The Seventh, with its toccato finale, has become a favourite virtuoso piece. The Russian pianist Denis Kozhukhin has a powerhouse facility but impresses more with his disarming sensitivity. Excellent sound. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



SIBELIUS

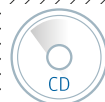
Pohjola's Daughter; The Oceanides; Symphony 2
Hallé Orchestra/Sir Mark Elder

Hallé CD HLL 7516

Sibelius's music has always been well served by British conductors: Beecham, Boult, Collins, Barbirolli, Davis. Now a Hallé cycle under Sir Mark Elder is under way. Their second CD (Symphonies 1 and 3 are on CD HLL 7514) starts with a gripping *Pohjola's Daughter* which brings out a cruel kinship with Dvorak's grisly symphonic poems. Sibelius's attempt at sea evocation was less persuasive – Boult's prewar BBC SO *Oceanides* [Dutton] set a benchmark, but Elder's account too is beautifully prepared. The Symphony, recorded live, with final applause, is refreshingly straight, with no romantic indulgence or exaggeration. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%





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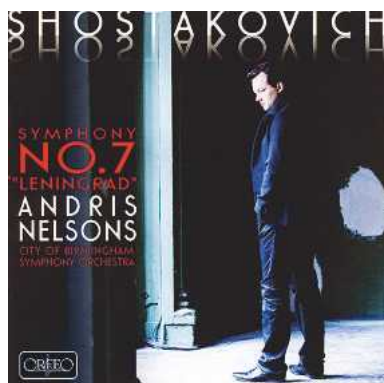
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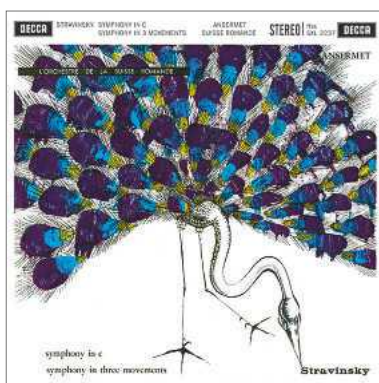
SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony 7 'Leningrad'
CBSO/Andris Nelsons

Orfeo C 852 121A

The 'Leningrad' had enormous significance when first heard during World War II, with the score micro-filmed and brought to the West in 1942. In the abstract it's markedly inferior to the Nos 8 or 10 but has an affinity with Mahler's massive and uneven Symphony No 7. Edited from performances at Symphony Hall in Nov '11 this recording sounds slightly congested – qualifying our rating – but the playing is extraordinary. Nelsons racks up tension in the first movt so much that you think something is about to explode! But, like Abbado at Lucerne, he has his players (solo winds, for example) really listening to each other. **CB**

Sound Quality: 80%



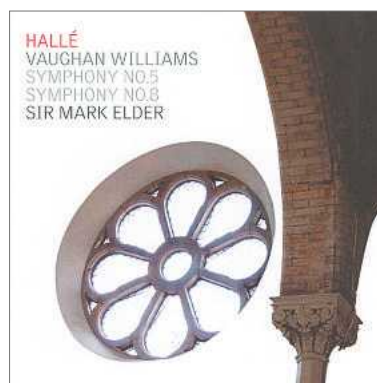
STRAVINSKY

Symphony in C; Symphony in Three Movements
OSR/Ernest Ansermet

Speakers Corner Decca SXL 2237 (180g vinyl)

One of the classic Decca sleeves and, arguably, Ansermet's finest Stravinsky LP – it was produced at Geneva Hall in 1960. And to my mind was by no means superseded by the Suisse Romande's 1982 digital remake with Dutoit. The Swiss conductor's long association with Stravinsky's music ended with the composer's dabbling with serialism (of which he disapproved), but these two scores, composed in the States in 1939/45, were well suited to Ansermet's analytical style. This reissue is cut at higher levels than Decca's own: brighter and cleaner in *Symphony in C*; the one in *Three Movements* is impressive indeed. **CB**

Sound Quality: 87%



VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Symphonies 5 and 8
Hallé Orchestra/Sir Mark Elder

Hallé CD HLL 7533

These two symphonies are indelibly linked to Barbirolli and the Hallé, who made premiere recordings in 1945 (HMV) and 1956 (Pye/Mercury) – with the score of the Eighth inscribed 'For Glorious John' and containing all the percussion instruments Vaughan Williams could think of! In this MediaCity studio version Sir Mark Elder brings out the darker implications of the work, so it's not just analogous to Beethoven's Eighth, a 'little' symphony. I've heard no account of the slow movement from No.5 more moving than this one (Bridgewater Hall, mostly live); it's a beautiful interpretation all through. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



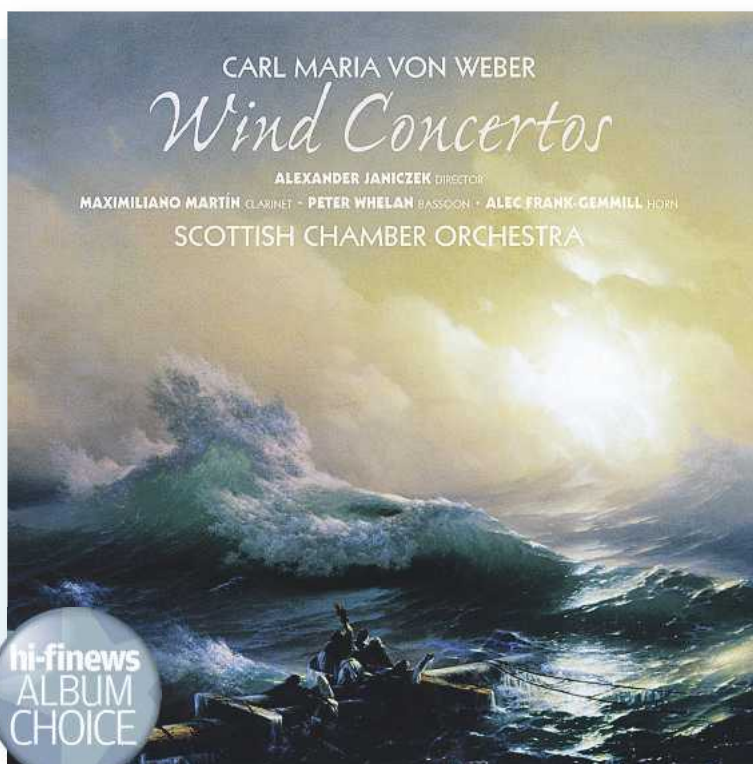
WEBER

Wind Concertos (for bassoon, clarinet, horn)
Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Alexander Janiczek

Linn Records CKD 409 (SACD, or up to 192kHz/24-bit FLAC)

Weber may have declared Beethoven 'ripe for the madhouse' but he was not above writing some wacky music himself: the finale of his Clarinet Concertino you'll find hard to shake out of your mind when you hear it! Like the First Clarinet Concerto and Bassoon Concerto, it was written for a player at the Munich Court Orchestra in 1811; the Horn Concertino was written five years before. Three fine SCO principals, Peter Whelan, Maximiliano Martín and Alec Frank-Gemmill, are the soloists on this autumn 2011 Usher Hall production by Philip Hobbs. And the Scottish Chamber Orchestra has the advantage, recording for Linn, of having its work published at the higher resolutions. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%



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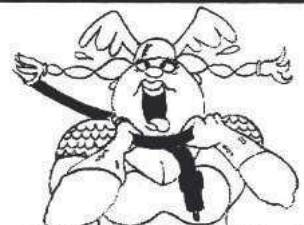
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LAST WORD

OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Has the quest for better sound gone out of style? Ken Kessler gives his take on the past 12 months

As I have been cast in the role of official *farbissener* – Yiddish for ‘perpetual whiner’ – for this august title, I worry about writing anything upbeat. You might think that I’ve given up being a grumpy old man. Moreover, you know that I am unmoved by any claims of trends, wherein, as with the LP, the movement is so small that it makes support for Morris dancing look like a craze on a par with Facebook.

AUDIO HIGH-POINTS

This, though, is my annual look at the previous 12 months, yet I’m not predisposed toward simply listing the year’s equipment high points. Like any year, there are stand-outs. To satisfy the demand for such a service, I will cite the Wilson Alexia, Meridian’s Explorer, Constellation’s solid-state electronics, the Air Force One turntable, the continued ascent of Audioquest’s Dragonfly, the D’Agostino preamp, the new Audio Research preamps and the REF 75, cool new affordable NAD hardware and Pro-ject’s Elemental turntable.

But equally, I counter with the demise of Milan’s TOP Audio, the deaths of too many of audio’s elder statesmen and the unpleasant and destructive survival of too many audio schmucks to list, without putting a Porsche in some lawyer’s drive.

But trends? Barry Fox recently wrote about the music industry getting behind Blu-ray as an audio carrier, but rightly asks how long it will take for them to screw it up as they did DVD-A and SACD.

REAL-WORLD EVENTS

Of greater import is what’s happening in the real world. Hi-fi shops are closing with the rapidity of casualties during the Black Death, multiples like Curry’s stock less and less in the way of decent kit, so I won’t let the arrival of two superb high-end emporia in London alter my pessimism.

Neither will I allow a few isolated cases of interest in hi-fi from unexpected quarters

lead me to think that there is hope for our hobby. We ask, why is a love of high quality sound dying like pursuits that natural evolution has killed off? Postage stamps become less relevant

by the minute, so stamp collecting has passed its sell-by date. Ditto coin collecting, building plastic model kits, whittling.

But the quest for better sound quality? Surely it transcends trends, when music remains so vital a part of civilisation?

Despite sales figures that suggest high-end audio is emulating the decline of the typewriter, I’m still approached by friends and colleagues in my other life – a world that has nothing whatsoever to do with audio –

who want to know ‘what hi-fi should I buy?’ That they even know hi-fi exists is a start. That they want the stuff is a frikkin’ miracle.

Among the most recent to seek my advice is ‘a woman of a certain age’, that is, one of my contemporaries, which means that she’s old enough to have been a student when LPs were the dominant format. Somewhere along the line, she moved away from hi-fi, but now wants to recapture the sensations of her/our youth.

The other is a 30-year-old executive with a taste for quality, but whose initial query was about the very brands that have dragged the term ‘high fidelity’ through the mud. He simply didn’t know better, any more than I know the ‘best’ makes of mountain bike or carving knife. His default purchases would have been – literally – the no-brainers. That is, swill for people with no brains. You know who the culprits are, the crudmongers who sell style over substance.

Luckily, the young man approached me before he ended up with a pile of injection-moulded garbage, and I was able to steer him toward vastly superior products for the same price, with the same functional capabilities, but with decent sound. That is but one soul saved, while I am no evangelist prepared to hit the campaign trail.

BLOWN AWAY

As for my distaff contemporary, she heard a friend’s system and was utterly ‘blown away’. So she called me for recommendations. We’re still working on it, but she has the funds for something good rather than excessive, for she is, after all, a normal person and not an audiophile.

Maybe there *is* something in the air. Another colleague, who only sells extreme high-end gear, is convinced that the huge new market for costly headphones will result in a stay of execution, if not quite a reprieve, for real hi-fi. He cited an article in a major paper in London, while a similar article appeared in the *New York Times* about the new audio ‘geeks’. So what we need, then, are *more* geeks.

With that in mind, if every one of you converted just two people this year, away from buying garbage to buying ‘proper hi-fi’, 2014 might turn out to be OK. ☺

‘Will the huge new market for costly headphones mean a stay of execution?’

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